

## A Different Halloween

Disclaimer: I own nothing but the laptop I used to type this.

### Chapter 1

Lily Potter was currently in a room filled with shouting, laughing and crying toddlers, the noise being generated was of a level that only young children were able to achieve. Lily Potter was in heaven.

Being cooped up in that cottage day after day was beginning to grate on her nerves, it was so bad that taking Harry to the clinic was now considered a day out for them. Lily had been adamant with James that Harry not only be aware, but comfortable with his muggle roots, hence his regular visits to this clinic.

That it was too dangerous for them to appear anywhere in the magical world drastically cut down on her medical options, a visit to St Mungo's would probably be a death sentence for the Potters. Nothing was more important to the twenty-one year old mother than the safety of her son. The toddler was desperate to get down from her knee and put his recently acquired walking skills through their paces. Lily was managing to resist Harry's efforts until a little curly haired girl approached them.

"Hello, my name is Hermione Jane Granger. What's yours? Mother says I'm not supposed to talk to strangers so that's why I'm asking."

The girl immediately brought a smile to Lily's face, she appeared about two but acted nearer ten. "Hello Hermione Jane, my name is Lily and this is my little boy Harry James Potter."

Lily had to choke down her laughter as this precious small child shook her hand before kissing Harry on the cheek. Wait till she told James this story, their son had a girlfriend and she was an older woman too. Lily was shaking her head and thinking she definitely needed to get out more when Harry slid off her knee and grabbed his new friend's offered hand. He called her 'Hermi' before slobbering on her cheek and then the two giggling children made their way across to where the toys were located. The clinic had a small, enclosed area the children could play while waiting.

Lily couldn't take her eyes off her fifteen-month-old son and his new friend, she didn't notice the woman who'd sat beside her until she spoke. "Hi, I'm Emma Granger. The little minx who just kidnapped your boy is my daughter. It's strange actually, she normally just sits there with her picture book while we wait to be called. The instant she spotted your son, the book was forgotten and she was on her way over here before I could stop her."

Lily couldn't help but like the well-dressed woman who had introduced herself, she had such a friendly manor that instantly put you at your ease. Lily also couldn't help noticing that Emma Granger casually radiated the kind of style and poise that her sister Petunia would sell her soul for. "Hi, I'm Lily Potter and my son there is Harry. I agree it's strange, Harry is normally very shy of people until he gets to know them. He took to your daughter in an instant, what age is she?"

Emma gave a wry smile at that often asked question, "My husband and I are not sure if she's two or twelve. Her birth certificate claims she was two last month but, well you've met her."

Lily returned the smile, two mothers talking about their children – oh how she'd missed this. "Yes, she seems a trifle old for her years."

This had Emma chuckling, "That's probably the nicest way that's ever been put. She spends far too much time in the company of adults, playing with children her own age is exactly what she needs."

Both mothers had hardly taken their eyes off their charges, they watched as Hermione chose an 'educational' toy before explaining to Harry how to operate it. Hermione was enjoying herself immensely and Harry appeared entranced by his new friend's voice and actions.

Lily and Emma were chatting away to each other while becoming captivated with watching their children play together. Lily learned that Emma was a dentist and she and her husband ran their own practice. A practice that Emma was currently only working part-time at, this would continue until Hermione started nursery school after Christmas.

Lily used her usual muggle cover story that her husband was in the police and she had been training to be a teacher before becoming

pregnant with Harry, thus putting a temporary halt to her career. She reckoned Emma was a good six or seven years older than her and was really enjoying their chat when the receptionist called Hermione's name. As the two mothers went to collect their children, Harry began crying that he didn't want 'Hermi' to go. Only Hermione saying she would be back soon put a halt to the tears.

Standing there as the little girl held his hand and spoke would melt the hardest of hearts. "Harry James don't cry. I need to go and see the nurse but I'll be right back."

Lily couldn't have taken her son away even if she wanted to, Harry sat on her knee and stared after his new friend as she walked away with her mother. His gaze never waivered from the door she had entered, a wide smile split his face when his new friend eventually came racing out the door and headed straight for him.

"Told you I wouldn't be long."

Harry was chuckling as he jumped back down to play with 'Hermi', only to be disappointed when his mother scooped him up a few minutes later because it was his turn to see the nurse. After hearing that she was the mother of a bright healthy boy, Lily led Harry back out to find Hermione and Emma waiting on them.

"Mrs Potter, would you and Harry James like to come to our house for some tea?" Hermione couldn't wait to get all the words out and was already holding Harry's hand.

Emma could only shake her head and smile at her daughter. "Sorry to spring this on you Lily, the little madam here doesn't want to be separated from her new best friend just yet. We only live a hundred yards or so from the clinic, you're more than welcome to come around for a cup of something and a blether. It will give these two monsters more time to play together."

Lily thought this was a great idea but asked if she could phone her husband when they got there. "With him being in the police, there is usually search parties out looking for us if we're more than ten minutes late." She knew James would start to worry if they were late but couldn't really tell Emma why, not that she would understand about dark lord's and a prophecy.

They had a phone fitted in the cottage so her parents could keep in touch, Lily loved being able to just pick up the phone and talk to her mother about everything from babies to baking. A car crash had put a sudden and permanent halt to those calls. Lily wasn't sure whether this was a death eater ploy to draw them out of hiding but she was forced to miss her parents funerals just in case, her son's safety was her primary concern.

Harry wasn't ready to walk that distance yet but determined to try as he held Hermione's hand in the weak late October sunshine. Lily eventually had to place him in his buggy, he relented without a fight as Hermione now walked beside him chatting incessantly.

Emma said what Lily was thinking, "When you look-up precocious in the dictionary, one of the definitions given is 'Hermione Jane Granger'."

The girl in question was currently telling Harry all about Halloween and how she had a witch's costume, even though she wasn't going to a party or walking around the neighbourhood this evening. Harry then had a moment of clarity that almost stopped Lily's heart from beating. "Mummy, Witch!"

Lily thought she covered it quite well though, "No Harry, little boys can't be witches, they would be a wizard."

Harry apparently understood, "Daddy, Unca Paddy!"

"Yes love, they would be wizards too."

Emma couldn't stop smiling at how well the children were getting on with each other. Hermione usually avoided children her own age and would always gravitate toward older kids, no five or six year old wanted to play with a toddler though so her daughter mostly found herself on her own.

They soon arrived at the Grangers where Hermione quickly led Harry into the playroom, Lily was pointed in the direction of the phone while Emma went to put the kettle on.

James as predicted was panicking until his wife was able to reassure him, "Darling, I'm in a perfectly normal home and their little girl is so adorable, she and Harry are getting on like a house on fire.

Since when do death eaters start impersonating dentists? We'll stay safe and be home later. Harry gets so few opportunities to play with children his own age, just watching them together is wonderful and reminds me what we're fighting for. We won't be too long love and here's the telephone number in case you need to get in touch."

Lily read out the number, told her husband she loved him before putting down the phone to find Emma standing there with a laden tray in her hands.

"I'm sorry but I couldn't help overhearing that, you're not in any trouble are you?"

The concern in the slightly older woman's face was easy for Lily to read. With her mother dead, her sister treating her as if she didn't exist and all her friends excluded because of the fidelius charm, Lily was desperate for another woman to talk to. It would be so easy to tell this complete stranger everything over a cup of Earl Grey and a digestive biscuit, Emma was one of those people you just instantly trusted. Lily couldn't do it though so tried to stick closely to the truth.

"No Emma, it's not what you think. We're in a spot of bother but not with the authorities. My husband really is in the police force and very good at his job. He works in the anti-terrorism branch and has made some bad enemies. One of those enemies has threatened Harry's life, this guy doesn't kid around so this is deadly serious. As you can imagine this has shaken us to the core. That these animals would attack a child makes me want to vomit, that it's my child targeted makes me want to pick up a weapon and fight for his life."

Lily found herself having to take the tray from Emma as she began to shake, "They would attack that beautiful child in there? How do you stand it Lily, I would be a basket case if Hermione was in that kind of danger."

"You just have to live your life as best you can while keeping Harry as safe as possible. We don't actually live around here and I can't tell you where we do. I can give you our phone number because it doesn't appear on any lists. James was worried that we might have been enticed into coming here but I just can't see your Hermione as a Mata Hari figure."

Emma was flabbergasted, "Lily, how can you joke about this? I would be going crazy!"

"Emma, if I don't joke about the situation then I would find myself sitting in a corner crying. I'm not saying I don't pay the occasional visit to that corner but most days I can avoid it. I have a wonderful son and a husband who needs me to be strong."

Emma put her arm around the petite redhead's shoulders and pointed her in the direction of the playroom, this was probably unnecessary as the sound of their giggling children would have led her straight there anyway.

Hermione had put her little witches costume on and was swishing her wand about all over the place, Harry was sitting patiently waiting on something happening. The minute the adults entered with the tray, Hermione moved a few toys to clear her small table so she and Harry could sit at it.

Lily tried not to smile at the apple juice and little pots of sliced fruit, this was definitely the house of two dentists. When Harry started eating his fruit with his fingers, Hermione put down her spoon and did the same. Both mothers thought that was about the cutest thing they had ever seen.

"Hermione usually has an afternoon nap about now, your Harry looks as if he could use one as well. Why don't we put them down and we can have a girls afternoon and chat."

Lily was tempted, when she saw Hermione take a blanket out a drawer and lead Harry over to a comfortable looking sofa her mind was made up. James knew they were safe and an hour or two chatting about normal things would fairly recharge her batteries before she was once more confined to the cottage.

Emma really enjoyed her afternoon, Lily Potter was such a lovely girl. She accepted there were things in her life the young redhead couldn't talk about but there appeared to be large black holes in her knowledge of things and events that just didn't make sense. It was as if she had been living on a desert island for a good few years. When they strayed from the subject of children and family, Lily noticeably struggled with a number of subjects. Emma was beginning to think that the Potter family were on some sort of

witness protection scheme, the entire police angle appeared too contrived. She'd said her husband was at school with her which posed a question Emma didn't ask, how does a twenty-one year old policeman get to make enemies so bad they threaten to kill your family?

Emma's senses though were telling her this woman was no danger to her or her family, there was more than a hint of goodness emanating from this lovely young woman. Danger was the last thing on her mind as she glanced over at the two toddlers lying on the sofa, they were now awake but appeared content just to snuggle with one another.

The door being opened and the sound of a man's voice alerted both women that they had been chatting for a lot longer than they thought. Hermione's voice piped up from the sofa, "Daddy, we're in here!"

As Dan Granger entered the room, Hermione had untangled herself from Harry and raced to greet her father. As this was her usual form of welcome, Dan was well prepared. He scooped her into his arms, spinning her around until her giggles filled the room. What Dan wasn't prepared for was the little boy who toddled over and held his arms up for the same treatment. Hermione was even more excited than normal at her father coming home, she had so much to tell him. "Daddy, this is Harry James. He's my best friend in the whole wide world!"

Dan glanced toward his wife and the beautiful young redheaded, both nodded their permission so Dan scooped up Harry as well and swung them both gently around. The happy sound the children made was music to all the parent's ears.

"Emma, I really need to be going. I was enjoying being here so much that I lost all track of time. Can I phone James before he really starts to panic? It's dark outside now and Harry and I should have been home ages ago."

Emma introduced Lily to Dan, her husband was by this time on the floor and playing along with both children. Lily hurried off to make her call. Emma was filling in any blanks that Hermione was leaving in her description of their day to her daddy. The image of her husband sitting on the floor with a child on each knee as he beamed with happiness was an immensely powerful one for both Granger

parents. Emma had two miscarriages before they were blessed with Hermione, her health had taken such a beating carrying her daughter to term that the doctors couldn't say if Emma would survive having another child. Both parents decided to be happy with the wonderful daughter they had, rather than risk everything by trying to have another child. While the decision might have been the right thing to do, it didn't mean the thought of Hermione growing up as an only child didn't hurt like hell.

This was the first time they'd seen their daughter interact with another child near her own age, both parents were greatly heartened by this development. Emma was certainly going to ensure that Lily knew she and Harry were welcome back here anytime.

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James felt the relief wash over him as he listened to his wife's voice, especially when she used their codeword that let him know she was telling the truth and in no danger.

"James darling, sorry for worrying you. I was chatting with Emma while the kids had a nap and simply forgot the time. Our Harry has had a wonderful day, I've never seen him take to anyone as he's taken to Hermione. He even wanted her dad to give him a swing because he did it with Hermione. Those two kids are just so cute together, it warms your heart."

"Glad to hear from you love and your new friends sound great, a pity we can't ask them over. I need you both to be heading home though, I don't want you out after dark without at least a few of us with you."

Lily was about to remind James that she could take care of herself when her husband's next sentence froze her insides.

"Oh hell Lily, the bastard's walking up the garden path!" James then proceeded to shout, "Lily, take Harry and go! It's him! Go! Run! I'll hold him off..."

It didn't register with Lily there might be a reason James had shouted these words, she was beyond thinking about anything other than her husband's safety. "James, don't be a fool! I need you, Harry needs you, don't you dare get yourself killed! Get your arse out of there now!" Lily was by this time on her knees and sobbing, the



phone practically glued to her ear as she listened. James just had to get out of there, she couldn't go on without him.

James figured Voldemort must think his family were in the cottage, reinforcing that view might buy him a few seconds to get out of here. He summoned his broom from upstairs before activating the defensive spell he'd placed on the furniture for such an eventuality. Everything in the room transformed into some type of animal just as the door was being blown off its hinges. Voldemort found himself under attack from a wide variety of creatures, everything from a sofa-sized bear to birds flying off the wall. James also fired a few spells to add to the maelstrom that surrounded the dark lord but this was mainly for effect.

The instant his broom reached his hand, James blasted the window to smithereens and zoomed through his improvised escape route like a bat out of hell. He had to dodge a couple of curses in mid-air but was sure Voldemort wouldn't follow while he thought Lily and Harry were in the house. The dark lord loved no one and wouldn't hesitate to sacrifice someone else's life to save his own, the hope was Voldemort accepting James would do the same.

Lily could hear the sound of battle and prayed Voldemort's scream was one of frustration, his next words lifted her heart from the dark pit it had been dwelling since James had uttered that awful sentence.

"What a fine example of a Gryffindor you are, running away and abandoning your wife and child to their fate. I shall take great pleasure in killing them."

Lily's emotions were in turmoil, she screamed down the phone. "You won't get near my son you sick bastard! We'll fight you with our last breath."

She slammed the phone down to find a crying Harry heading for her, Lily was still sitting on the floor sobbing but she now had her son in her arms and her husband was alive. "Daddy got away my baby, your daddy's fine and he'll be with us shortly."

Dan hadn't a clue what was going on but his wife's hand on his arm reassured him that she knew, he couldn't stop Hermione as she rushed over and attempted to wrap her little arms around the upset mother and son.

Emma asked a question, more to let Dan know what was happening here. "I take it that terrorist just found the house you were staying in?"

Lily was fighting to get herself under control, she didn't want to scare the children. Realising how close they had all come to their end was hammering her emotions for now, she managed a nod before attempting to speak. "I can't thank you enough Emma, if you hadn't invited us here then Harry and I would have been at home. James would die rather than leave us and I won't let any harm come to my son while I draw breath. He would have killed us first and then Harry would have been defenceless!"

Hermione may not have understood all the words but got the meaning behind them, she was not a happy two-year-old. "Not hurt Harry James!" was screamed out from her little body.

Lily felt the magic leave the girl as the glass front of the nearby grandfather clock exploded, thankfully not in their direction. The little girl was now crestfallen, "So sorry mummy, didn't mean to do it again."

Lily held the child and stared directly into her tear filled hazel eyes, "Honey, that was not your fault and I will fix it in a second. Dan and Emma, this changes everything. I'll tell you the truth as soon as I contact James. You need to know anyway, for your family's safety."

Lily's wand shot into her hand from her wrist holder and waved it at the clock, it was repaired in seconds. She kissed Hermione on the forehead, "Told you I would fix it honey, I need to go and get something from my bag."

Lily quickly headed for the playroom leaving three stunned Grangers behind. The clock was even ticking now, it had never worked! Harry took his new friends hand and repeated his words from earlier. For Emma though, they took on a whole new meaning.

"Mummy witch!"

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When Voldemort heard those words coming from the telephone handset, his anger knew no bounds. The wave of magic that poured out of him destroyed every single item in the house and blasted out all the windows. It was so powerful, it registered in the Scottish highlands.

Albus was in his office when all the alarms he had tied to the Potter cottage went crazy. The old wizard gave a wry smile, a magical discharge of that magnitude could only mean one thing. His plan had worked and the dark lord was dead.

He didn't think that anyone else would have the guile or conviction to turn the mutterings of a near squib into a self-fulfilling prophecy, desperate times called for desperate measures.

It had taken all of his Machiavellian manipulations to bring his scheme to fruition, but lady fortune had apparently just smiled on him. It took no more than a subtle hint for Black to quietly change the Potters secret keeper but the real challenge had been nudging Lily Potter to discover the sacrificial ritual. The muggleborn students didn't arrive at Hogwarts with the same sense of in-built respect and reverence for the school's headmaster that their counter parts did, Lily Evens was particularly sceptical. Only her overwhelming need to keep her son safe allowed Albus to steer her in the direction he wanted. If she had carried out the ritual properly, then her son would be alive and the dark lord gone.

This raised another issue though, Albus had long suspected that Voldemort had performed dark rituals in an attempt to escape death. Unfortunately there was only one way to prove this theory and killing Voldemort was easier said than done. With baby Harry now banishing the dark lord, Albus needed to take control of the weapon he had just created. Should Voldemort cheat death, he would come after the boy at the first opportunity. Albus was sure that, should this come to pass, he was more than capable of controlling any situation and turning it around to his advantage.

That was the future though, he needed to deal with the here and now first. He would dispatch Hagrid at once to the cottage and have him bring the child to Hogwarts, he would implement the next phase of his plan tomorrow. After all, it was Halloween and he so enjoyed the feast.

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James didn't know where to turn next, the glimpse he had of a healthy Peter standing by the gate tore at his sole. He originally thought Peter must have been tortured to death, he'd clearly given the information on their whereabouts willingly. He now knew the identity of the spy within the order but that bastard Wormtail also knew all their boltholes. With Lily amongst muggles, he was forced to wait until she contacted him. This didn't mean he couldn't get the word out though, he removed a mirror from his pocket and said Padfoot.

A worried face appeared in his mirror, "Prongs! I was just going to come over to the cottage, something about today just doesn't feel right and I can't find Peter."

James couldn't keep the bitterness out his voice, "That's because he was too busy showing his mate Voldemort around Godric's Hollow!"

"What? The cowardly bastard, I'm going to kill him! Where's Harry and Lily? I know you'd never leave them and Lily would probably rather face Voldemort than get on a broom with you."

"They're visiting some muggles they met when Lily took Harry to the clinic for his appointment today."

Sirius wasn't convinced, "Are you sure they're muggles? One hell of a coincidence don't you think?"

"What death eaters do you know who could impersonate muggles well enough to fool Lily? Besides, she used our codeword so I know their fine and not being forced to say things she doesn't want to."

Sirius may be fighting mad but he was still curious, "Codeword?"

"If she calls me 'darling' at the beginning of our conversation then I know she's fine, even under the Imperius they wouldn't know to tell her to say that. She insisted we keep that one to ourselves and I think we need to listen to Lily more often. The trouble at the moment is she needs to get away from the muggles before contacting me. Get hold of Moony while I wait, the three of us will be going to collect my family."

It suddenly dawned on Sirius just what Peter's betrayal meant. Sirius Black had a wicked temper at the best of times, this certainly wasn't the best of times. "That rat knows all our contingency plans, I am so going to kill him!"

James came right back at his best friend, "Sirius, for once use that brain of yours before going charging into a situation. I want to kill a certain rat too but getting Lily and Harry to safety has to come before everything else. We need to get to them as... I'll call you back, Lily's mirror just activated."

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Lily had grabbed the precious item from her bag and said her husband's name into it, to see his windswept face lit by the quarter moon sent her heart soaring higher than his broom. "James, are you all right darling?"

Emma and Dan had made it to the door and both had to concede the relief and love shown by Lily couldn't be faked outside a few of Hollywood's top earners.

Her husband's voice was projecting the same set of emotions from the mirror. The Grangers needed answers but were already leaning toward helping this young couple if they could.

"I am now love, we were very lucky tonight."

All heard Harry's shout, "Daddy!"

Lily turned the mirror around so James could see their boy. "Hey kiddo, how's daddy's favourite boy tonight?"

Harry was laughing now, his mummy was here and he was talking to his daddy, the toddler's world was complete. He was also desperate to tell his daddy about his new friend who was standing beside him. "Daddy, Hermi!" this might have been a lot less articulate than Hermione's introduction to Harry's father but it got the job done.

"Hello sir, I'm Hermione Jane Granger and Harry James's bestest friend."

James looked at his son and the little girl dressed as a witch, Hermione had even put her hat back on while telling her father the story of her day.

James couldn't hide his concern, "Lily, are you sure you know what you're doing?"

"Yes darling, I think these two will be going to the same school when they're eleven. Are you coming to collect me? I'm not taking Harry out by myself now he's actually hunting our boy. Peter knows all about us too, we need to do things differently from now on."

Dan asked Lily if he could speak to James for a moment, "Hi, your wife and son are very welcome to stay at our house while you arrange to collect them. This won't bring those terrorists to my door though, will it?"

"No sir or we wouldn't dream of it. My wife will explain some things to you that you really need to know. The Potters owe the Grangers a huge debt that can never be repaid, your wife and daughter's kindness today means I still have a family. Anything we can do for you is yours for the asking, you have my word on that."

Dan told James their address, telling his wife and son they would be there soon he shut of the mirror. Not before he heard his son shout 'bye daddy', which just reinforced how lucky they'd been tonight. He'd listened to Dumbledore and tried it the old wizard's way, a way that almost ended in disaster. Lily's opinion was to get their son as far away from this monster as possible, a long haul flight out of Britain sounded good right about now. James swore to listen more to his wife's opinions from now on, the fidelius had almost finished the Potters. It was time to contact both Sirius and Remus, then collect his family.

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Emma was desperate for some answers but had bided her time as Lily had more important matters that required dealing with first, the time had come though.

Lily didn't even give Emma time to ask anything, it wasn't fair to keep these good people waiting any longer. She sat on the same sofa the kids had slept on and immediately had a child on either side

of her, Lily put an arm around each of them. "Let me guess, strange things have been happening around Hermione that you've been unable to explain. These incidents probably happened when she displayed a strong emotion like tonight."

It wasn't really fair to tease Emma and Dan like this but she needed them to accept something that was so out of their comfort zone they had to be guided there step by step. What she was telling them here would change their lives forever. "You have been racking your brains and hitting the books, all in a vain attempt to define what was happening with your daughter. So far you've come up with a big fat zilch! I would think your next move would be batteries of medical tests?"

It was easy to see from Dan and Emma's expressions that Lily was hitting the bull's-eye every time. "I can save you a lot of trouble, worry, heartache and expense by telling you there is nothing physically or psychologically wrong with Hermione. I personally think she's adorable!" Lily kissed the smiling girl on the forehead, of course Harry had to be kissed too.

Telling worried parents their child was not only fine but beautiful was always going to win you brownie points.

Lily continued before the Grangers could ask any questions, "The reason I know so much about this is the exact same thing happened to me. My parents were worried sick and were so relieved when they discovered what it was, they embraced my differences. That is what I'm hoping for here today, or should that be tonight. Hermione broke your clock with a burst of accidental magic, I repaired it using my wand and a structured magic spell. I attended a special School of magic in Scotland for seven years where I learned how to do these things." So far so good Lily thought. They haven't grabbed their daughter and thrown Harry and her out the door, that was a good sign.

"There is an entire magical society living along side your normal one, we have our own government, health and education system with our own currency thrown in for good measure. James really is what you would call a policeman, only he works for the department of magical law enforcement. You see I am a witch, my husband and son are both wizards and little Hermione here is a magical child in every sense of the word."

The Grangers were understandably more than a little bit sceptical of this story, Lily handed Emma her wand. To the dentist it was merely a stick, her husband also felt nothing other than a trifle foolish when he held it next. Their daughter on the other hand was a different matter entirely.

Hermione had been walking around the house, waving her toy wand at everything since she got her witch costume last week. This wand had beautiful, multicoloured sparks shoot out the end when she held it, Hermione wanted one of these.

Lily took her wand back and animated some of the toys in the room. This delighted both children who immediately slid down from the sofa to play with them, leaving the three adults to continue their discussion. "You would have been contacted when Hermione reached eleven and given this explanation, as well as the option to send Hermione to magical school. One of the strictest laws in our world concerns keeping the secret of magic just that, a secret. I'm bending that law, if not breaking it because, as parents of a magical child, there are some things you really need to know. You will have surmised from what happened earlier that ours is not a utopian society at the moment, we're in the middle of a bloody civil war fought over class and breeding. Like you both, my parents were not magical. This sees me classified as a 'muggleborn' and the lowest form of magical user in some eyes. James is a pureblood, his parents and grandparents were magical. Harry is classed as a half-blood, oh how I hate that term! To put it simply, some of the purebloods think they're nobility and the rest of us nothing more than plebs who are here purely to do their bidding."

Emma was struggling to understand this, "So this society judges you by your parentage and there's an actual war being fought over this?"

"Pureblood magical society is still stuck in the Victorian era, gas lighting, servants for everything and arranging good marriages for your offspring to enhance your family's standing and protect the bloodlines. Most of these people don't believe children like your daughter or me should have magic, far less be taught how to use it."

Dan was ready to blow his top but mindful there were two children playing happily in the room. "Lily, that is utter balderdash. It's



genetics at a level for children! We are human beings, not drosophila in a biology class. Surely you don't believe this?"

"Of course I don't. My husband and his best friend are both purebloods who think the whole idea is a load of tripe, they are called blood traitors for their stance. The leader of these terrorists has really whipped his followers into a frenzy, they even have their own uniforms. They have been committing crimes against muggles and muggleborns while the magical government has looked the other way, too afraid to take on the fight and discover how many of their own they would be fighting against. Only when purebloods started being murdered did they start to officially take notice, anyone who disagrees with this terrorist usually ends up dead. James and I have escaped from him three times before tonight, I guess that makes this our fourth."

Lily understood this was a lot for the dentists to take in and tried her best to put it into some sort of context they could relate to. "This may sound like games children would play but it can get you murdered, imagine Lord of the Flies where all the children had deadly weapons. Good people are afraid to make a stand or even to speak out against these people, those few who do usually end up dead. James lost both his parents that way."

The witch was once more trying to reign in her emotions, "I wanted us to take Harry and get out of the country, I was persuaded that the Potters leaving Britain could start an exodus that would hand victory to the other side. Well screw them all and the horse they rode in on. That child there is my only concern, the little boy playing with your daughter. I will tell you anything you want to know and offer advice based on my own experiences. The next piece of information I will give you though is crucial, when Hermione was born she would have been magically registered as being a witch. If these terrorists succeed in taking over the government, that information places you and your family in grave danger. You have already heard from me that these animals wouldn't hesitate to kill a child."

Lily went down on her knees to play with the children while Dan and Emma retreated to the kitchen. None of the adults felt like they could eat a bite but both children still had to be fed. Dan asked his wife the question that was at the heart of the matter. "Do you believe that our little girl can perform magic, that she's a witch?"

"I believe she'll still be our little girl whether that's true or not. The explanation certainly accounts for all of the things we've seen Hermione do, and some of the more serious things we thought might be causing it frightened the life out of me. If it takes us having to accept she's magical to have a healthy child then count me in. Brain abnormalities or genetic anomalies I don't think I could cope with, I would much rather she was a healthy witch. Apparently I've just spent the entire afternoon chatting with one and I like Lily a lot. If that's what the future holds for Hermione then bring it on."

Dan knew his wife held herself totally responsible for their inability to have any more children. Therefore when something threatened Hermione, Emma would put a lioness defending her cub to shame. Both parents had been getting progressively more worried that something was seriously wrong with their precious child. These unexplainable outbursts kept happening and were getting more severe in terms of damage, would she one day destroy their house?

There was unquestionably a sense of relief at being able to put a name to their trouble, however strange that name may be. Only one thing was for certain, they needed to learn much more about this before any life changing decisions could be made. If the Potters didn't have anywhere else to go then they could stay here for now, they had plenty of room and Hermione would be delighted to have her 'bestest' friend staying over.

-oOoOo-

Dumbledore was sitting at the feast and attempting to decide what pudding he should have when Hagrid entered the great hall. This caught his attention because Albus had distinctly told him to take baby Harry to his hut and tell no one about this. Using his quietest voice that meant perhaps only the centaurs didn't hear him, Hagrid gave his report.

"Professor Dumbledore sir, I did what yeh asked an' went to the Potter's cottage but baby harry wasn' there. The cottage was a right mess but there were no bodies to be found anywhere."

This set a few of the senior staff off and Minerva was quizzing Hagrid before turning her ire toward him, Albus though was currently too busy running scenarios through his mind to let that bother him. He'd lost the Potters from his plan, there was no way short of an

imperious curse that Lily would allow the same thing to be set up again. Albus Dumbledore always had a plan in reserve, or in this case another family ready and waiting. He was pretty confident Lily would have told Alice about the sacrificial ritual since both young mothers were in the same position. This would need a touch more finesse to pull off since it would place his new twenty-one year old Head of Slytherin in potential danger.

Severus would have to leak the information to Voldemort and one slip would cost the young man his life. It would appear Severus had already worked this out as he had worn a scowl since the moment Hagrid spoke.

Albus would hate for anything to happen to Severus because of his plan. He'd had a century to work on it but Albus still hadn't discovered why he was so attracted to bad boys, and Severus was such a bad, bad boy!

-oOoOo-

Lily was down on her knees helping Harry eat his dinner at the tiny table, Hermione of course didn't need any help. Dan and Emma were having trouble equating this scene with the mayhem and murder talked about earlier, they hoped to have a long chat with the Potters after the kids were put down for the night.

The blissful scene was interrupted by the sound of Lily's mirror going off.

"Hello darling, where are you now?"

"We're right outside the garden gate, I've set up some mild muggle repelling charms around the house so we don't get disturbed by people celebrating Halloween but everything appears fine. We're approaching the door now and will be with you in a moment."

Dan went to open the door to his visitors while Lily trailed on behind with her wand drawn, she wasn't taking any chances with two children in the house. Dan opened the door and instantly recognised the young man from the mirror, his friend also had a wand drawn and a big black dog pushed passed him and into the house. A dainty hand shot past Dan and grabbed James by the front of his jacket,

pulling him into the house. Lily was soon wrapped around her husband and kissing him as if they'd been apart for months.

"Excuse me sir, my name is Remus Lupin. Can I suggest that I come in and we shut the door? Don't worry about these two, they've been married for over three years and still act like it's their honeymoon. We keep thinking that one day they'll calm down but it obviously hasn't happened yet."

A child's squeal of 'Paddy' broke the couples kiss, "Where's Harry?" James asked unnecessarily. The sound of laughter easily gave away the boys location, they group headed for the playroom.

Harry was currently laughing with both his arms locked around the big dog's neck, Hermione decided it was a good dog so was patting it on the head. Lily's entrance changed everything, "It's safe Sirius, we need to talk."

The Grangers got to witness another facet of magic when the big dog transformed into a rather handsome young man, Harry still had his arms around the man's neck.

"Unca Paddy, Hermi!"

Sirius was now ruffling his godson's hair, "Everything checks out Prongs, nothing to be concerned about here. Unless that is, you're worried about this little cutie in the witches costume stealing our Harry's heart away."

Hermione stared at Sirius for a moment before turning to her parents, with pleading in her voice and her best puppy dog eyes she asked them a serious question. "Can we get a dog?"

A/N Thanks for reading

## Chapter 2

Hermione was predictably overjoyed at the thought of her new best-friend staying in her house, the little girl's excitement was contagious. All the adults began to relax at the sight of two toddlers being just that, toddlers. Harry though was playing-up from all the attention and wanted to ride on 'Paddy's' back. Sirius could never deny his godson anything and transformed, Harry was soon on his back with his mother holding him on. Of course Hermione had to be next.

Like children the world over, when they're getting all their own way, they instinctively know to push the boundaries. He now wanted to ride on his father's back but Lily was putting her foot down. "No Harry, there's not enough room in here. You know that's only allowed outside."

Harry looked toward his father, knowing that not to be true. Harry was far too young to grasp that activity was only allowed when mummy wasn't in the house.

Dan was intrigued, "Why is James different from Sirius, is he a St Bernard or something? The hall should be big enough for him as I definitely want to see this."

With both kids jumping up and down in anticipation, Lily was easily outvoted.

Hermione's eyes were the size of saucers as she watched the transformation. Like any young child, she associated any animal of this shape with only one thing. With an expression of utter bliss on her angelic little face, she said the first thing that came into her head. "Santa!"

Remus and Sirius fell about laughing and Lily was having a hard time containing her giggles. The thought of James pulling Santa's sleigh proved too much and she was forced to surrender to her laughter.

Emma was too busy staring in amazement at this magnificent and noble creature to explain the difference between a stag and a reindeer to her daughter.

Sirius was trying to speak while gasping for breath, "Oh that is so much better than Bambi, let it be proclaimed that Prongs shall be known as Prancer from now on!"

This cracked the two marauders and Lily up until she noticed Harry beginning to get agitated, he was standing impatiently waiting to be placed on his father's back. Lily plonked her now laughing son on the stag's back and then plopped Hermione right behind him. The little girl wasn't frightened in the least and immediately wrapped her arms around Harry. With Hermione clutching Harry, Lily was easily able to hold both children steady as Prongs pranced around the hall. This again had Remus and Sirius in fits of laughter and it appeared the name Prancer might actually stick.

Dan was standing behind Emma with both arms around his wife's waist as he kept telling himself that their daughter was perfectly safe. It was hard to refute that idea while the children's laughter was loud and plentiful as both rode this great beast around their hall. It was also hard to refute the existence of magic after what they'd witnessed tonight.

Dan thought he also understood all the laughter and pandering to the children's every whim. These people were basically reaffirming they were all still alive and attempting to place what could have happened behind them. He'd rarely seen his daughter happier so had no problems with this understandable behaviour. It was also understood that all the adults would be sitting down to do some serious talking after the children went to bed. They were letting off steam now before that discussion brought the events from earlier crashing home once more.

-oOoOo-

Hermione had insisted that Harry James should sleep with her and the two mothers were standing watching as their children snuggled into each other. They may have had loads of excitement today but they were also exhausted. Emma had been about to offer a pair of Hermione's pyjamas for Harry to wear when Lily waved her magic wand and the child's clothes became little red and gold pj's, of course Hermione had to have the same.

Emma was left wondering just what else magic could do. "Is Harry off nappies already?"

Lily could only smile in way of an answer, "Harry is wearing pants that have very specific charms on them. They will keep him dry and clean while banishing any little accidents. They even change colour when the charms are wearing out and he needs a new pair. The magical world doesn't do nappies, for which I am eternally grateful."

Emma couldn't help but wish that pants like those had been available from her nearest Mothercare store. "Lily, I don't know how to say this, so please excuse me for asking but were you insured? You're most welcome to stay here until you get things sorted out only I just realised you must be standing there in everything you own. Do you need clothes, money..."

The young redhead couldn't help but hug this woman who'd already done so much for them. "Thank you Emma for even thinking about us but you don't need to worry. The Potters are quite a wealthy family and we are the last surviving branch. We were hiding out in that cottage against my better judgment. Harry's grandparents thought they were safe behind the protections of the Potter ancestral home, that didn't work either. Where we go from here is one of the things James and I are going to have to discuss."

Emma was relieved, she had visions of the young family being destitute. Another thought though had her mentioning something else to Lily. "Bill and Tracy Jennings live next door and are selling their house to downsize, their family are all grown and it's actually bigger than ours."

The thought of staying close to Emma and watching their two children grow together was a very attractive one, unfortunately there was an immensely powerful homicidal maniac trying to ensure that would never happen. Until he wasn't a factor in their lives, their only option was to leave the country, telling very few people where they went.

With both children now asleep, the baby monitor was switched on and they headed off to join the gentlemen awaiting them. There was a story to be told and questions to be answered, this could take all night.

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Lily may have been in a strange bed but was very familiar pair of arms that held her close, she was basking in the comfort they provided though Lily knew it couldn't last. The next subject was sure to be a heated argument yet there was no dodging the issue as far as she was concerned.

Remus had left earlier to owl Augusta Longbottom. Frank and Alice needed to know this charm could be defeated, Augusta was their best option for getting that information to their friends. Sirius was currently patrolling the house in his Padfoot form, ready to alert the occupants at the first hint of trouble.

Lily gathered her courage and pushed on, "James, we may have tried to warn Alice and Frank. I can't help but think he'll go after another couple with a young child."

James held the woman he could have lost tonight and felt her tense, he also felt unable to deny her anything. She was expecting an argument but he didn't have the heart to give her one. "I know love and I understand, we'll go tomorrow."

Lily had to kiss her husband for that. They should be able to leave Harry here and get the visit over with, then it would be back to trying to figure out what they did next. Leaving Britain was rapidly appearing to be the only viable option open to them.

-oOoOo-

Petunia Dursley opened the door of number four Privet Drive and almost shut it again at once when she discovered who had rang her doorbell. Only the steely conviction in the well-remembered voice stopped her slamming the door in the couple's face.

"Now Petunia, you don't want to force me to take my wand out and open this door, do you? The neighbours might even see me do it!"

Petunia stood aside and allowed Lily and James Potter to enter her house, thankfully for all of them Vernon wasn't home. They entered the living room where baby Dudley was currently contained in his playpen and rapidly working his way through an entire packet of biscuits.



Petunia was exceedingly unhappy at them being here and, now that the neighbours could no longer see, made no attempt to mask her ire. "What are you doing here? I thought I made it quite clear the last time we spoke that I never wanted to see you again. You've made your bed and now you have to lie in it."

Lily tried to hide the hurt her elder sister's words caused, "Petunia, last night nearly had us lying in wooden boxes. The house we were staying in was attacked and it's mainly down to luck we made it out with our lives. We're being forced to leave the country for our safety and I'm worried about leaving you behind. Britain isn't a safe place to be at the moment."

Petunia let more of her anger out, "Why the hell should we be forced to move? Your type can kill each other as much as they like, it doesn't concern normal people like us."

Lily tried once more, "Petunia, this animal is killing everybody! He doesn't believe that normal people like you have the right to live. Killing your family would mean nothing more to him than pulling the wings off flies. If he should discover you're my family, he will come for you."

Petunia was showing signs of worry now. "I would just tell him that you and I don't speak. He wouldn't harm us then?"

"This wizard doesn't listen to anyone Petunia, he would kill all three of you."

James understood he was there purely to provide moral support for his wife. Anything he said would only harden Petunia's attitude against them. He was sure now they were hearing the real reason behind her point blank refusal to listen.

"Vernon would never leave, not because of some wizard. He just wouldn't do it."

Lily had tears forming in her eyes now, she recognised the truth in her sister's words. Vernon would think he could order Voldemort out of his home and the evil wizard would politely apologise and comply. Vernon could get them all killed. "Petunia, there must be some way to convince him? You know I wouldn't be here if the situation wasn't deadly serious."

Petunia could only dejectedly shake her head, "Mentioning this to him would only result in hours of ranting and Vernon digging his heels in even deeper."

Lily couldn't hold back the tears as she shifted her gaze to her only nephew. "Petunia, would you give your life to save your son's?"

"What kind of a stupid question is that? Of course I would."

"I'm sorry sis, I know you would. I'm just trying to convince you how serious this situation is. We may not be able to convince Vernon to move but, if things go really badly I might be able to offer you a chance to save Dudley. It uses magic yet leaves no trace, Vernon need never know."

This peaked Petunia's interest, "How can I do magic, I don't have any?"

"You're my sister and we share the same blood, Dudley is my nephew by blood. We can offer him a chance to live but it's pretty drastic, a real last resort."

"Will it hurt my baby boy?"

Lily shook her head, "It might be the only thing that keeps him alive!"

Lily knew that the only thing able to overcome her sister's pathological hatred of magic was the wellbeing of her son. Whatever Petunia's faults, she adored her son and would do anything for him.

It was a different Petunia who quietly asked, "What would I have to do?"

This was really hard for Lily to say but it had to be said. "If the worst comes to the worst, move in front of Dudley and tell them to kill you instead."

Even though this was the most morbid conversation she'd ever had in her life, Petunia had no trouble imagining herself doing that for her precious son. She didn't think she was anything special, any parent would do the same. "What else do I have to do? Will this keep my son safe?"

Lily was steeling herself for the next bit, "We have to perform some magic on him that Vernon need never be told about. It won't affect Dudley at all and I truly hope it's never needed."

Petunia couldn't miss the concern in her sister's features. "You think it will be needed though, don't you?"

"Petunia, Harry is currently being looked after by some friends and I can't think of anything other than this that would get me to leave his side. I performed the same magic on my son but it's useless unless I'm there beside him. Every minute that I'm apart from my baby is precious but I also love my nephew. You are the only family I've got left Petunia and this could be the last time I see you!" Both sisters were now softly crying. "If circumstances force you to do this, it will place a protection over Dudley that should kill this madman if he tries to harm him."

Petunia couldn't see a reason not to do this, she prayed it would never be needed but might sleep sounder knowing it was there. "What do you need me to do?"

James wasn't too sure about this idea but had been married long enough to know now was not the time to mention it.

Lily returned from the kitchen with a sharp knife and a saucer. "Relax sis, we both need a little cut on our thumbs, nothing more. James here will heal the cut in an instant." She cut the ball of her thumb and collected half-a-dozen drops of blood onto the saucer before James healed her. Petunia got a bit of confidence from watching this and quickly repeated the process.

Lily was all business now, "Ok sis, I want you to take Dudley's top off. I need to draw some symbols on my nephew and then cast a spell. We'll know if it's worked because the symbols will disappear, leaving no trace and no reason for Vernon to get upset."

Lily used the mixed blood to etch runes on Dudley's chest, each arm and his forehead. Petunia sat with a giggling Dudley on her knee, he liked this game. Lily then got ready to cast the spell, she took Petunia's hand in her free one. "I truly hope this is never needed Petunia, please do everything you can to convince Vernon to move."

Petunia nodded but Lily was highly doubtful if her sister would even mention it to her husband. Lily cast the spell and the runes were absorbed into Dudley's not so little body.

James now had his arm around his crying wife as she was effectively saying goodbye to her sister. "Petunia, if the worst should happen I'll know, even if we're on the other side of the world. We'll get here as quickly as we can."

Petunia was hugging her son while contemplating the situation, after weighing up the options she knew what she wanted to do. "Lily, if the worst does happen, would you take care of Dudley? Marge may know everything about raising bulldogs but she knows nothing about raising baby boys!"

Lily bent down and kissed her sister and nephew on their foreheads. "You know I would Petunia, just like I know you would care for my Harry if you had to. Goodbye Petunia, I need to go and hold my own son close. In these times, it's not just the babies that need cuddles."

The Potters let themselves out and James couldn't hold back any longer. "With you using your blood to power that spell, you do know there will be a price to pay if Voldemort comes calling?"

Lily nodded but was unrepentant. "I was ready to give my life so our son could have one, there can be no higher price than that!" She suddenly stopped because her feet refused to move, the thought she just had froze her body. "Do you think that's what Dumbledore intended? The both of us dead and Harry left on his own?"

James tried to provide comfort but it felt like someone just walked over his grave. "We know Sirius would have looked after Harry."

"James, there is no question Sirius loves Harry but can you be sure he wouldn't have chased after Peter first?" A new and even more terrifying thought hit Lily. "Oh James, have I just done the same to my sister? Set her up to take the fall so we can live? I never meant to, you know I never meant to?"

James was able to be totally honest in his answer this time as he offered the necessary comfort to his wife. "Lily, you tried everything short of kidnapping to get Petunia and Dudley out of that house. We both know why she wouldn't leave Privet Drive. If it had been just

her and Dudley, I'm sure we could have convinced her to come with us. That husband of hers is an arrogant, bigoted, small-minded arse of a man. You provided your sister with a chance to save her son and are prepared to pay whatever price magic demands of you. I couldn't be prouder of my wife and promise you to raise Dudley as my son if the worst does happen."

Lily had both arms around her husband as she spoke softly to him, "You are so good to me. Let's get back so the other Potter man in my life can cuddle me too. I think I need a lot of cuddles today."

James tried to raise a smile from his wife. "Since Harry James's best friend is bound to be there at the same time, you should get your quota of cuddles today. Bare in mind, I'm always available to meet any shortfall."

Lily kissed her husband. She understood there might be a price to be paid later but, as long as she had the two Potter males in her life, she would consider it a fair deal.

-oOoOo-

Severus Snape was dealing with lying on a cold stone floor, while contemplating the price he was currently paying. Severus was caught between the two most powerful wizards in the world and suffering badly for it. One continually made cow eyes at him and clearly wanted to cuddle Severus to death, the other cast the cruciatus curse on you as way of issuing a welcome greeting.

Severus was shortly going to be forced to choose a wizard because trying to play both sides was going to get him killed! As he struggled to gather his wits from a very angry Voldemort's greeting, he couldn't help but imagine what his life would be like under either of these totally different nut cases. At the moment he was leaning heavily toward putting pink ribbons in his hair and changing his name to Shirley, that could be the after effects of the powerful cruciatus curse though.

Voldemort's cold words rang around the room. "Well Severus, I hope you have some information for me? Otherwise, I shall become really displeased."

Severus noticed Peter Pettigrew lying shaking in the corner. As a visual aid to what happened to you when the dark lord became really displeased, it was a totally unnecessary accompaniment. Severus removed a scrap of parchment from his robes, "My lord, the location of the Longbottoms. Their son required a salve for a rash and I insisted on delivering it personally." This was of course a lie as Albus had given the secret to him for this very purpose, Bellatrix took the parchment from his hand to present it to her master.

Voldemort though didn't appear any calmer, "That's fine but it's the Potters I want. What information have you for me on them? Just what is the old fool up to?"

This was not good, when the dark lord asked you a question your health depended on having the answer he wanted. His already bad mood was about to get worse. "Dumbledore has no idea what happened at Halloween. Wherever the Potters have fled to, no one inside the castle knows anything about them."

"Oh that's too bad!"

Voldemort lifted his wand to curse Severus again when the potions professor blurted out the first thing that came into his head. Anything to avoid the pain of that curse again. "She has a sister! Lily Potter has a muggle sister!"

Voldemort's voice was now as smooth as velvet. "Ah Severus, I knew I didn't kill you for a reason. Unlike some others, your information is always relevant and accurate. Come closer and tell me more of this sister."

-oOoOo-

James had proven quite accurate in his prediction, Lily currently had two children cuddling into her. She was also hoping to have more luck convincing the Grangers than she did the Dursleys. "Emma, today it felt as if I said goodbye to my only sister, I don't want to lose you too! Please take our warning seriously, I couldn't bear to think of anything happening to this beautiful girl here."

Emma attempted to reassure her, "We are taking it seriously and think we will also be leaving Britain. We don't have the same pressure of time that you have bearing down on you but Dan was

contacting our lawyers about selling our practice and this house. The prices we get for both will determine where and when we can move."

James had heard from his wife about the conversation she had with Emma last night. Leaving aside the debt the Potters owed this family, James would still want to help them. "Emma, any help you need, financial or otherwise will be available to you. I can't have my son missing his best friend."

Harry may have no idea what the grown-ups were talking about but he recognised that last bit. "Hermi!" was shouted like a chant and lightened the adults' mood.

Moving abroad was a daunting thought and Emma could appreciate the benefits of already knowing some people there, especially since Hermione was already so comfortable with them. "Have you decided where you're going yet?"

James nodded, "My family owns a large house near Wellington in New Zealand, that seems like a good place to start. We will of course keep in touch and you're very welcome to join us there whenever you want. Whether we stay there or settle in another part of the world is something we can decide at our leisure when we don't have to worry about our safety."

Lily appeared to snuggle into the children even more, "I won't feel safe until we're all out of the country and out of the reach of that madman, I'm just glad you listened to us."

-oOoOo-

Petunia knew Vernon wouldn't listen to her concerns, Vernon never listened to her, Vernon wouldn't be listening to anyone ever again. This fiend was worse than any Halloween monster that Hollywood had invented, he'd laughed while mercilessly torturing Vernon until her husband was foaming at the mouth. A green light hit her husband and Vernon Dursley was no more. The creature had repeatedly asked Petunia where the Potters were and her continual denials of that knowledge ended Vernon's life. They now appeared ready to accept that she genuinely didn't know where her sister was hiding, that didn't mean her ordeal was over.

From the instant they were rudely awakened in their bed, Petunia had known deep within herself that she was going to die. That Severus Snape was also in their bedroom with this animal told Petunia that fact, she couldn't be left alive to identify her attacker. Petunia was all screamed out, a calmness seemed to be creeping over her mind. She had accepted she was going to die but had an opportunity to save her son and maybe take this bastard with her, Petunia would be eternally grateful to Lily for Dudley's life.

Voldemort was attempting to make the best of a bad situation. "It would appear you are telling the truth and your sister didn't trust you with her location. Never the less, we can still use this situation to send her a message." His wand tracked to the loudly crying child in its cot, only to see the mother throw herself in front of it.

"Not Dudley, not Dudley, please not Dudley!"

"Stand aside you silly girl...stand aside now."

"Not Dudley, please no, take me, kill me instead..."

Severus was well aware it was incredibly risky to interrupt the dark lord but it was also glaringly obvious that Petunia had recognised him. Should she be left alive to deliver the dark lord's message, then Severus was as good as dead. James Potter would take it personally and Lily would kill him on sight, even Dumbledore wouldn't be able to save him from the redhead's wrath. Trying not to let his voice shake too much, Severus spoke out. "My Lord, a dead sister sends its own kind of message."

Voldemort paused for a second as this woman begged for mercy before firing the killing curse at her. He then turned quickly to his servant. "Interrupt me again Severus and you will experience first-hand just what kind of messages my wand can administer."

Severus had noticed the faint glow that left Petunia and entered her child's body. He briefly thought of risking his life to bring this to his master's attention but his well-honed sense of self-preservation quashed that thought ruthlessly.

Voldemort whirled back around, determined to shut the crying brat up. "Avada Kedavra!"



Severus felt himself flung off his feet and smashed into the bedroom wall, he barely had time to register the dark lord was blown to pieces before the force of the collision saw him losing consciousness.

The mild notice-me-not and silencing charms the attackers had placed around number four Privet Drive were blown away by the magical backlash, so were all the windows, a large portion of wall and a fair bit of the roof. Within moments, the nosey neighbours of Privet drive were out their beds and gawking at the ruin that used to be number four. As multiple 999 calls were made, one brave soul risked his own life by diving into the house to rescue the crying child. The entire house appeared in danger of collapsing at any second and the other bodies that he saw there would just have to wait until the emergency services arrived. The child was safe and that was enough of a miracle for one night.

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Lily shot straight up in bed screaming, the whole house must have heard the haunting cry of 'Petunia!'

James was once more trying to comfort her when she appeared to get control of herself, "We need to get over there as quickly as possible."

He was about to object when Lily interrupted him. "I need to go too! Don't look at me like that James, they will be more inclined to hand that baby over to his aunt than his uncle." They had an audience by this point and it was to one of them that Lily spoke next. "Emma, I hate to impose on you more..."

Emma was standing at the door in her nightdress, along with Dan, Remus and Sirius who had all responded to that scream. She didn't give Lily time to finish, "Go! Dudley will be welcome here and of course we'll keep an eye on Harry until you get back." Both Grangers headed straight for their daughter's bedroom to check on the kids as the other four got ready to leave.

Lily appeared so exhausted just by getting ready that James had to apparate her to the little park at the end of Privet Drive, they were soon joined by Sirius and Remus. All four were bathed by the flashing lights of the police, ambulance and fire brigade vehicles that appeared to be breeding like cockroaches. A British Gas Emergency

Response van also added its lights to the macabre carnival ahead, they were soon having to push their way through the rubbernecking crowd.

There was also an auror presence as James and Sirius recognised a face or two, Sirius headed off to gather information from them while Remus canvassed the crowd. James had a full time job just keeping his wife upright, first sight of the house they had visited yesterday had Lily's legs giving out. It was only when Remus returned with some news that Lily appeared to come back to life.

"Dudley's alive and currently in a neighbour's house while they work out what to do with him, he's in number seven."

They shoved their way over to the house and knocked on the door, only for it to be answered by a policeman. Lily pushed right past him and the policewoman currently holding the child fared no better. The female officer was left with little option but to relinquish her grip on the toddler as the crying woman wrapped her arms around Dudley. Her male colleague though had correctly read the situation. "Can I assume you are related to the child?"

James was left to answer as Lily grieved for her sister while holding the precious boy. "We're Dudley's uncle and aunt, my wife here is Petunia Dursley's sister. We've just arrived and rushed over here on hearing the child was pulled from the building, can you give us anymore details?"

The policeman reckoned there was no harm in giving the basic details that most folk standing out on the street already knew. "We found both Dursleys dead and another man in some sort of strange robe badly injured. We have suspicions there may have been a fourth person present but have found no trace of them yet. The gas supply has been shut off to the entire estate and the team from the gas board are currently searching for the breach."

Sirius arrived with some more news that he quietly passed on to James and Remus, "It would appear a certain dark lord is no more. One of his death eaters was also in the house, a certain Snivellus finally showed his true colours. I can't think how else his master would have found out about Petunia, even the rat didn't know any more details than Lily had a sister. Snape knew her though, didn't he?"

The marauders didn't know she'd been listening but it was Lily who answered. "Yes he did. We grew up together and we were still friends when she married Vernon. I can't believe he would sell us out?"

It was Remus who quietly answered, "We thought exactly the same of Peter, ten years of good friendship wiped out in an instant."

Both police officers suddenly realised they had something to do elsewhere and left the house, the group then found themselves joined by Barty Crouch. "Is this the child responsible for ridding the world of the dark lord? Is it really a muggle?"

Lily was in no mood to pander to pureblood politics tonight, "It has a name! He is called Dudley and yes the child is non-magical."

Barty ignored the bad manners and lack of respect, the woman had just lost family. "Do we have any idea how this happened?"

James chose to deliberately misinterpret the question. "Yes! Severus Snape was a childhood acquaintance of my wife and her sister, Petunia. He must have led his master straight to them. Before tonight, even our closest friends didn't know Petunia's married name far less where the Dursleys lived."

Dumbledore chose that moment to make an entrance, leaving James wondering just how long the old wizard had been listening before making his presence known. The group found themselves distrusting Dumbledore more as each new fact revealed itself.

"Severus Snape has been my spy throughout this conflict, I will personally vouch for him. I shall take my potions professor back to Hogwarts where Madam Pomfrey is more than capable of administering to his care. I really should take the child and have him checked as well?"

Lily Potter was exhausted and had a child in her arms, anger and loathing lent her speed and strength. Before anyone could even think about stopping her the little fireball had lashed out with a clenched fist. It was a thing of beauty and the blow caught Dumbledore squarely on his crooked nose, his long beard was soon tinged with bright red highlights.

"You come anywhere near my family you bastard and I'll kill you myself! Where does this leave your blasted prophecy now old man? I said from the very start you were full of shit and I've been proven right. Our house on Halloween, Petunias house tonight, anyone like to lay odds the Longbottoms were next? You come anywhere near my boys and I swear you'll pay."

James had his arm around wife and nephew, purely because he didn't want her to fall over. His other hand held his wand that was directed at Dumbledore, Sirius and Remus had their wands trained on the same target. It was time for James to use his pureblood heritage to do some good. "Barty, Severus Snape has been implicated in the murder of two members of my family. I won't stand for him being released into anyone's custody, I want him arrested and tried as our laws dictate. Peter Pettigrew is also implicated since he willingly led his master to our house last night. I assume that house is in much the same condition as this one, we didn't hang around long enough to find out." James voice was filled with power as he continued. "These cases will end up being tried in our court, with the public in attendance, otherwise I shall start evoking some old laws. It doesn't take too much imagination to see a few blood feuds escalating into another war, I'm assuming no one here wants that to happen?"

Barty recognised that this wasn't the auror James Potter that was talking here, rather Lord Potter. That he happened to agree totally with the opinions this young man just expressed handed him an ally he didn't expect in his push for the minister's job. "Lord Potter, it would be my intention to prosecute everyone involved in death eater activities. That most certainly would include a marked follower found at the scene of two murders. Albus, if your boy is as innocent as you claim, then there is nothing for you to worry about. It will take every drop of veritaserum our potion masters can brew but the guilty will be going down."

Albus was horrified, he needed to put a stop to this at once. "Barty, don't you think that is a tad severe? Our world will need time to heal, this could reopen a lot of old wounds and pit brother against brother."

"Albus, we've suffered under a dark lord so powerful, the population were afraid to say his name. That same dark lord has just been

destroyed by a muggle baby, a little boy who doesn't appear to have a scratch on him. Our world shook in terror yet a boy with no magic saved us all. I say we owe it to that child to clean our world up, we can't count on another ridding us of the next dark lord." Barty was quite pleased with that effort and could see that quickly becoming part of his campaign slogan. That his most serious competition for the post probably had tattoos on their forearms was a bonus he intended to cash-in.

James was quick to answer, "Barty, you have the complete support of House Potter in this matter. Now I need to get my family out of here. Dudley is my nephew and a ward of House Potter, I'll be in touch to sort any paperwork out later."

Barty nodded his acceptance, Lily was clearly the boy's closest blood relative and the child would need their protection until he could get all the death eaters dealt with. "Where are you staying at the moment?"

James looked directly at Dumbledore, "Barty, I'd rather not say. I don't trust everyone present with that information."

He apparated them out of there, the two marauders right behind him.

Albus removed his wand to heal his nose and clean his beard, he also made another attempt to influence Barty. "Once you start down this path Barty, there can be no turning back. Who knows what it will unearth."

Barty's mind was made up, he saw this as his path to the big prize. "This is the way it has to be, our world changed forever in that bedroom tonight. Sorry Albus."

Barty left and missed Dumbledore's parting comment, "You will be Barty, you will be!"

A/N Thanks for reading.

## Chapter 3

A child's cries alerted Emma and Dan that their guests had returned, both quickly headed toward the hall to greet them. Lily was barely able to keep standing yet held onto the child for dear life. James had to take a stand. "Lily, let Emma take Dudley for the moment. You need your rest."

Emma took the offered child and held him close to provide comfort, she led the group back into the living room. They all took seats and awaited news of what had happened.

James and Lily were sitting together on a sofa, he had both arms lovingly placed around his wife as he spoke to the Grangers. "I hope we can count on your help, not only now but in the years to come. I have no idea how to raise a muggle boy and I think we'll be seriously looking at the house next door when Lily recovers her strength."

Pleased as she was to hear that news, Lily had more important matters preying on her mind. "Sirius, I need to know. Please tell me and be honest."

James had hoped to have a conversation with his friend and break the news to Lily as gently as possible, he should have known better.

Sirius moved so Lily could look into his eyes and see he was telling the truth. "They used the cruciatus on her husband before killing him, obviously attempting to discover where you were. The only other thing cast on Petunia, apart from the killing curse, would appear to be a partial body bind. She was found in front of Dudley's cot, dead but otherwise untouched. Your sister must have flung herself there."

Lily was sobbing at her sister's passing but there was more than a hint of relief that Petunia wasn't tortured or sexually assaulted. She was well aware the fate females could suffer at the hands of death eaters, Lily was thankful that Petunia had at least been spared that.

Dan watched as James comforted Lily but it was to his wife holding the boy that his eyes kept returning. This probably wasn't the correct time but Dan just had to ask. "Is it really over, and are you serious about moving and needing help?"

James couldn't miss the signs of hope in the man's eyes and it convinced him even more this was the correct decision to make. "Dan, it would be unfair to raise a child without magic in a magical home. I also want Harry to be comfortable in the world that produced his mother. There is so much I need to learn and I'm hoping you can help teach me?"

Dan's eyes were now shining with unshed tears, "I think I would like that James." That was probably the understatement of his life, being asked to help raise two boys was a dream come true for both Grangers.

Lily was now quietly crying into her husband's chest as James tried to give Dan some idea of the task they faced. "Lily and Petunia were very close when they were younger, that one was magical and the other wasn't drove them apart and destroyed their relationship. I'm already determined that won't be allowed to happen with our children and we'll take all the help we can get with that task."

Emma answered for both Grangers. "You can count us in, we have a magical child and no idea of the trials we'll be facing. Knowing that we'll have your help with understanding Hermione is a fair exchange. I think we should look after Dudley tonight though, Lily looks ready to drop and probably should be in bed."

James had to agree as his wife was almost asleep as she snuggled in. "Lily's magic, along with Petunia's sacrifice, powered the ritual that saved Dudley's life. She'll be pretty weak for a day or two."

"He can sleep in our room tonight, we can dig Hermione's cot back out tomorrow."

Sirius smiled at Emma, "Could you point Remus and me in its direction? We'll have it up and ready in no time. You'll soon get used to being around people who can perform magic."

Dan watched on in amazement as the cot was floated from the garage into their bedroom before becoming spotlessly clean and assembling itself. He thought Sirius was wrong, how the hell could you ever get used to this?

Emma had the baby blankets ready before Lily practically stumbled into the room. The witch looked more dead than alive as she handed

Emma a pair of magical pants before kissing Dudley goodnight on the forehead. "Thanks for this Emma, I think I do really need to lie down."

Sirius was leading Lily out the room by the arm when James appeared at the door. "I leave you for two minutes and find you on the arm of another man?"

Sirius couldn't help but continue the joke, "It's that old Black charm, what can I say?"

Lily was too tired and emotionally drained to even raise a smile, she wasn't about to let them away with anything though. "James honey, remind me when I'm feeling better that I owe Sirius a slap to the back of his head."

This raised a smile from James, whatever transpired tonight hadn't broke his wife's spirit. He led her back to their bedroom as Emma prepared to put Dudley down for what was left of the night.

Dan knew he was far too wound up to sleep so glanced toward the two remaining marauders, "You both look like you could use a drink, how about a glass or two of whiskey?"

Sirius had his arm around Dan's shoulders, "That's the best idea I've heard all night. Lead on Dan, you can be sure we will be right behind you."

As the single malt flowed, the three men chatted and laid the foundation of a bond that would only strengthen over the years. Dan finally asked the question that was at the forefront of all their minds, what happens now?

Remus tried to answer but also had to be honest, "I have no idea Dan. Our society was heading down the toilet and we've just been handed a reprieve, what we do with it is anyone's guess. One thing is sure, hell will freeze over before the purebloods will acknowledge a muggle baby saved their arses. There will still be a few factions fighting for control of our government, all pulling in different directions. What happens next will depend on who wins."

Sirius agreed, "We were getting creamed out there while these factions sat and discussed the merits of allowing aurors to match the



lethal force we were being faced with. James and I were trying to stun murderers who were doing their best to kill us because the ministry feared we could end up killing family members who might also be death eaters."

Remus was nodding, "Barty Crouch was the only one with the balls to stand up and fight for what was right, he put Dumbledore in his place again this morning. James threw his full support behind him and his word carries a lot of weight. When Lord Potter speaks, people in our world sit back and listen."

Only the smoothness of the beautiful amber nectar saved Dan from choking on his single malt. "James is a lord?" He was trying not to imagine how embarrassed Emma would be at offering the Lady Potter a loan of money.

Sirius was chuckling at his discomfort. "Yeah, he rarely uses his title, or the power it gives him but it's there when he needs it. The fact he married a muggleborn witch was a proper slap in the face to the pureblood movement. You've seen them together though, James would have married her irrespective of her blood status or magical ability."

Remus was also chuckling but not at Dan. "That Lily is not only a very powerful witch but a near genius as well, you can't imagine how upset the bigots were. They were headboy and headgirl at school, Hogwarts golden couple. Lily was studying under one of the castle's best professors to become a charms mistress and a full professor herself."

Sirius was also caught up in their reminiscing, "Another professor was so disappointed as he was trying to coax Lily to study potions, James could easily have studied transfiguration to the same level. We're part of a group of friends that are all either powerful, talented or influential wizards and witches that Dumbledore has been leading as part of his group. Since it appeared Lily broke his nose tonight, I'm guessing we're no longer part of that group."

Remus had no doubts or regrets, "We already have a new leader, James, with Lily by his side will do for me. Voldemort is gone, no thanks to the ministry or Dumbledore. Our world needs to change and while we still have people like the Potters, we have a chance. About the only thing Dumbledore has said that I agree with was that

the Potters leaving the country would take a lot of the hope with them."

Sirius agreed but was looking at those events with different eyes. "He appealed to James's sense of duty and emotionally blackmailed Lily into agreeing. Harry's life was on the line and the old man didn't give a shit, or perhaps that was his plan from the start. All I know is I'll never be able to trust the old man again."

Dan was beginning to see there was a lot more to learn about this magical world than he first thought. He couldn't think of better teachers than the ones he had now.

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The staff of the Daily Prophet found themselves not only working all night but being given the rollicking off their lives by the paper's editor. Peter White was laying down the law. "I don't give a shit who killed him, the goblins will give away free gold before the Daily Prophet prints that a muggle was responsible for his downfall! The owners would skin us all alive and pin our hides above the entrance. Lose this muggle-who-lived crap and come at it from a different angle. You're supposed to be journalists, go and write me something I can put on the front page of our paper!"

Peter was getting into his stride, "If I was a follower of the dark lord I would be shitting myself about now, all-powerful wizard my arse! A muggle baby may have killed him but I want people to remember it was the Prophet that buried the bastard! Dig out all the information you can on him and his followers, we'll see how these arseholes like reading about themselves instead of spending their evenings placing dark marks over peoples houses. Their leader is not only dead but humiliated, let's put the boot into these sick bastards while they're down."

The staff couldn't believe what they were hearing, it appeared the Prophet was declaring war on the death eaters.

"From now on we print the name, no more of this you-know-who nonsense. The prick got taken out by a muggle toddler, the Daily Prophet is done cowering in fear of retaliation. Get going and start tearing these bastards down, we've a deadline to meet."

There was a mad rush as the Prophet workers were probably the first to realise that the morning would bring a new dawn to their world in ways never imagined before.

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That mornings Prophet should really have come with a ministerial health warning, quite a few readers almost choked on their breakfast because of it. The banner headline proclaimed the unthinkable in more ways than one.

YOU-KNOW-VOLDEMORT?

HE'S DEAD!

Even printing the dark lord's name the day before would have been a death sentence. These bold headlines stated that not only was it over, there was nothing more to fear.

The story itself was a masterpiece of the Daily Prophet's art. Take a few known facts and fabricate whatever story you wanted to fit them. Everyone was aware Voldemort had delved into the darkest of rituals, it was also known that the Potters had eluded him again since the photograph of their wrecked cottage had appeared in yesterday's edition. When you then highlighted the fact that the house he died in belonged to the Potters muggle relatives, the fiction that would become the established story of what transpired that night was born.

Voldemort had travelled there to perform a dark ritual designed to provide him with access to the Potters. Something went badly wrong and the magical backlash left only the muggle toddler and an accompanying death eater still alive. The Prophet promised more news when the death eater, Hogwarts new head of Slytherin Severus Snape, regained consciousness from his substantial injuries.

Peter White felt there was more than enough truth in the story that it would stand any questioning, there was probably more truth there than most of their stories. Any new information that surfaced to contradict their sanitised view of the event could either be altered or conveniently lost and forgotten. The muggle baby would be consigned to become just that, a muggle baby that was lucky to

survive and instantly ignored by their world as inconsequential. The Prophet didn't even print names of any of the three Dursley's who were involved. Peter figured that in the magical context of the story, muggles were irrelevant.

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Barty Crouch loved the story. It stuck it to the death eaters, especially Dumbledore's boy, and totally ignored the role of the muggle child. Barty thought if he played this just right, he could even imply to Lord Potter that he personally had played a role in keeping the child's name and involvement out of the paper. The only thing that could make this morning any better would be viewing Dumbledore's reactions as he read this morning's paper. Barty would pay good gold for that because he was sure it would be memorable.

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Barty wouldn't have been disappointed. Albus currently had bits of scrambled egg dripping out the side of his mouth and sledging down his beard. Poppy was beginning to worry the old wizard may have suffered a stroke while her friend Minerva was fighting a losing battle trying to regain control of the great hall. She was struggling because the students were going nuts in their celebrations.

Not only was Voldemort gone but so was the man that had become the most hated professor inside Hogwarts. This was quite an achievement considering Snape had only been teaching in the castle for a couple of months.

Albus hadn't suffered from a stroke, he was currently surfing through his mind for the stroke of genius it would take to get Severus out from under this catastrophe. He was also more than a bit peeved that the paper hadn't contacted him before printing any of this. Albus would have to add a visit to their office to his already busy schedule for today. He had anticipated a couple of days grace to swing Barty around to his way of thinking, at the very least where it concerned Severus. Now he would be forced to use the direct approach if he was to have any chance of saving his handsome young potions professor.

The headmaster could only imagine the joy that must be sweeping the country at this moment, he though had no intention of celebrating just yet. For one thing, Albus was almost certain the dark lord would return. He was also now denied a weapon to fight against Voldemort with. A muggle child was probably useless and well out of reach under the protection of the Potters. With the prophecy stripped of all its credibility, all that remained was the alcohol-induced ramblings of a sceptical seer. The Potters were lost to him forever and would use their influence to ensure the Longbottoms followed the same path. Albus Dumbledore wasn't too worried, they would all come running back when Voldemort returned.

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Breakfast in the Malfoy family home was fairly typical of those who currently had a specific tattoo imprinted onto their arm. The Prophet headline proclaiming their master was no more also destroyed their appetite. They would all need to prepare themselves for walking the tightrope of getting themselves declared innocent without decrying their lord enough to end their life when the master returned. There was also the question of how much gold it was going to cost each of them, dodging a stay in Azkaban wouldn't come cheap.

At no point did any of them consider they might be in serious trouble here. Their family name, status and gold had allowed these privileged purebloods to literally get away with murder for generations, surely nothing was going to change that? Also at no point did any of them consider they might have seen the last of their lord. He'd told them many times he was immortal and they all believed every word he said.

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The spirit that, until a few hours ago, had been the most feared being in Britain was rapidly trying to leave the country. Trying being the operative word as by no sense of the meaning could its progress be called rapid, the spirit felt as if it still had a body and was trying to wade through waist deep three day old porridge. The spirit sensed something familiar approaching at a very fast rate of knots and was bowled over when this thing crashed into it.

Disorientation ruled supreme for a while until Tom felt another approaching, the impact felt smaller but the spirit suddenly

understood what was happening. It now recognised these occurrences as the parts of its soul that he had ripped off and stored inside containers, this wasn't supposed to happen? Any remaining doubts vanished with the arrival of the third piece, the impact may have felt less severe but the effect was electrifying. With no body, magic or wand, the terrified spirit of Tom Riddle's only available options appeared to be hiding or fleeing. Since it was slower now than earlier, the spirit would need to find a cave or something to seek shelter.

The spirit was currently making its way through a small wooded area and was considering the possibility of hiding below some exposed tree roots when the fourth horcrux soul piece slapped into him. There was only one left, how was this possible?

Tom was thinking back over forty years ago when he had first discovered the spell. He had studied it meticulously and could swear he performed it perfectly all five times. He was of course correct, yet it was difficult to remember two small lines of warning within three pages of complicated and complex instructions read over four decades ago by a then young boy.

The ancients who concocted the horcrux ritual had understood they were snubbing their noses at Mother Nature and daren't give her any weapon to fight back with. Therefore there was one day of the year when the ritual shouldn't be performed and, after creating soul containers, it was really not advisable to get killed on this day either. November the second was the day of the dead or more commonly known as all souls day now, not a good day to die if you had parts of your soul stashed about the country.

The day's origin was shrouded in the mists of time but its function was reconciliation for souls that, for whatever reason, hadn't been able to cross over. On the ancient's calendar, this day counted as an amnesty and was celebrated by surviving family members.

Since the ritual that ended his life was one of love and sacrifice, this provided Mother Nature with the opening she needed. As the final piece of soul joined its brothers, the spirit began to be pulled into the ground. The frantic shrieks being emitted by the spirit had every bird within a mile radius taking to the wing, those creatures on four legs all fled in the opposite direction from this abomination. Tom Marvolo Riddle was struggling, screaming and cursing at the top of his voice

over this unjust treatment of the greatest wizard the world had ever known. He passed away eventually, unnoticed, unmourned and Tom Marvolo Riddle would never walk the earth again.

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Harry and Hermione were surprised to find a third child being placed at 'their' table for breakfast. On hearing that this was Harry's cousin who would be staying with them, Hermione introduced herself as she'd been taught. "Hello Dudley, I'm Hermione Jane Granger. Pleased to meet you." Hermione lent over and kissed him on the cheek.

Dudley didn't know who this strange creature was, he just knew she had come between him and his breakfast bowl. The toddler also couldn't resist the wavy brown locks that were now easily within his reach, Dudley grabbed a good handful and pulled.

Hermione let out a yell so Dudley pulled it again, only to find himself dumped out his chair and wearing three breakfasts. A crying Harry was clutching a crying Hermione while staring at his now crying cousin. Harry's "No hurt Hermi!" left no one in any doubt about what had happened here. In a matter of seconds, breakfast had turned into a war zone. A burst of accidental magic had left Dudley lying on the floor and covered with three plastic bowls worth of porridge, leaving the adults to deal with three crying children.

Lily's wand quickly had everything cleared up and she placed Dudley back into his chair before speaking to the child, Dudley Dursley was about to learn some new words. "Dudley, that was bad! It's wrong to pull hair, say sorry to Hermione."

Dudley was having trouble comprehending what was expected of him, words like bad, wrong and sorry were alien to the child. Lily switched her attention to Harry, hoping to set an example. "Harry, it was wrong to do that to Dudley. Say you're sorry."

Harry though was in a belligerent mood, "No hurt Hermi!"

Lily could only smile at her son, he was so like his father it was scary. "Yes darling and Dudley won't do it again. I need you not to do that again either, please say you're sorry."

Harry stared at the newcomer and decided to do what his mother asked. "Sorry!"

Dudley saw a new breakfast being set down by Emma to these two and quickly made the connection. He shouted "sorry!" to the whole house and a bowl appeared in front of him, everything else was forgotten for the moment.

Dan cleared his throat before speaking, "These two are very protective of each other, aren't they? Emma, I think we may have to reconsider sending Hermione to nursery school after Christmas. We can't really have other kids being blasted across the classroom if Hermione gets upset."

Lily was left to explain to the three marauders how Hermione had wrecked the clock while the wheels in her head were spinning with an idea. "Emma, I have three friends who all have children about the same age as Hermione and Harry. Our original plan was to share looking after the kids and allow us all the opportunity to work at least part time while they were growing up. If we included you and Hermione into the plan, it could be perfect."

Emma liked where this idea was going but wanted to be sure she understood. "Are you saying we each take a day per week to watch over all the children? It sounds good but only if we didn't have to drive over half the country dropping off and picking up kids."

Lily could only smile at her new friend, "Emma, we won't be driving anywhere. You've seen how we travel, James and I could take Hermione and the other mothers would drop their kids off when it was your turn. Alice has a son Neville who's exactly the same age as Harry, my friend Mary's daughter, also called Mary, is a couple of months older. Maia's daughter Luna is the youngest, she had her first birthday last month. It has always been my intention that Harry would attend primary school and this would get him used to other children, hopefully help with controlling his accidental magic as well."

Dan asked an obvious question, "Don't magical children go to primary school?"

James shook his head, "Most children are at least ten before their magic starts to settle down, therefore they go to school at eleven."



Before that, it's usually homeschooling to prepare them for Hogwarts."

Dan thought the idea of having half-a-dozen children running about the house was wonderful and was trying to figure out if they could financially afford for him to take that day off as well.

Lily was now trying to keep Dudley from snatching the other two bowls, he'd finished first and obviously wanted more. She popped a piece of banana into his hand and he happily munched away at that. The boy was going to find a lot more fruit and a lot fewer biscuits and cakes in his diet from now on. Petunia apparently had given him whatever he wanted, this was something else she was going to have to wean Dudley off.

It didn't take Dan and Emma long to concur that both thought this daycare arrangement was way better than sending their daughter to a nursery. They were keen to meet the other children, and their parents.

Sirius and Remus headed out to search for news and discover if Augusta had answered their message. The Grangers and Potters would be staying close to home while they tried to integrate their new family member. Emma also pointed out that they were friends with the Jenkins who would be only too happy to let them look around their home if they were interested in buying.

They were currently having some play-time with the children before considering a visit for the afternoon. James was thinking that the muggle neighbourhood had kept his family safe while the dark lord was hunting for them, it would do now he'd been banished. He was also thinking that Harry going to primary school with Hermione would be highly desirable, in two days the kids had practically become inseparable. He imagined that there would have to be a room for her in their new house for Hermione, these two were really 'bestist' friends.

Lily hadn't been raised in the magical world or she would have understood the bonds that can form between magical children. Harry and Hermione would probably always be close and having them mixing with other children was something he wanted to do as soon as possible. James didn't want Dudley becoming an outsider and a

bigger group would lessen the reliance Harry and Hermione were placing on each other.

James expected tears and tantrums of spectacular proportions when they eventually left the Grangers' home, hopefully moving next door would lessen the effect. He didn't think Lily would be returning to working for her charms mastery anytime soon, nothing against Professor Flitwick but neither Potter was ready to go anywhere near Hogwarts, or more specifically Dumbledore, for the foreseeable future.

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The Prophet's editor peered up from his desk to see the outlandish figure of Albus Dumbledore standing there. "Funny, I could have sworn I told my secretary I didn't want to see anyone today? How did you get in here?"

Albus looked down at the little bald man with the middle-age spread and thought this would be easy. "Ah, Mr White. As I explained to your secretary, I am not just anyone."

Peter was not impressed by this old git's appearance, reputation or attitude. "I have no wish to shatter your self-delusion of grandeur but I certainly would include you in my description of anyone. Now, if you'll excuse me, I am a busy man."

Albus chose to ignore the less than subtle hints at a dismissal and carry on with his mission. "As am I Mr White. This is why I'm sure we can reach agreement very quickly on a matter I wish to raise. I need you to print a retraction to your paper's description of Severus Snape as a death eater. There are extenuating circumstances that I am unable to reveal at this time but it is imperative that this happen without delay."

Peter thought it was time someone explained the facts of life to this old fart. "Mr Dumbledore, if something looks like a duck, walks like a duck and quacks like a duck – it's a pretty safe bet to call it a duck! Your boy Snape was found in full death eater regalia, a dark mark ingrained into his arm, in the company of Voldemort at the scene of two murders. You can call him any pet names you like, to me and the Prophet, Severus Snape is a death eater. You can claim extenuating circumstances but we will continue to class him as a

death eater until the court tells us otherwise, a public trial is what's required here. Since you are currently standing in my office without an auror accompaniment, I will assume the Prophet has broken no laws and carry-on as normal."

Albus was beginning to lose his patience with this little prick, didn't he know the word of Albus Dumbledore was not to be questioned but mindlessly obeyed? "I am well aware of the laws since I helped draft a fair few of them, what we are dealing with here is a matter of social responsibility. Your irresponsible writing could incite the public into acts of retribution and riot, our society doesn't need vigilantes at the moment."

With timing any comedian would have been proud of, a reporter stuck his head through the doorway and interrupted their discussion. "Sorry to interrupt boss but there's a mob forming at the ministry. They've brought a rope and are demanding that the death eater be handed over to them. It looks like it could get ugly."

Albus thought this proved his point brilliantly but Peter had other ideas. "Then what are you doing still standing there? Get your arse over to the ministry and take a photographer with you. This will be tomorrow's front page! Be sure to tell the photographer that, should they hang Snape, I need a picture I can print that won't scare the readers away. Horrific facial expressions and eyeballs almost popping out are not good images, we need something a bit more tasteful than that."

The reporter nodded before racing away, Albus was dumbfounded. "Does a man's life mean so little to you?"

Peter was affronted, "How dare you say that? If that mob hangs your boy, a good picture of them doing the deed could put as much as twenty percent onto our total sales tomorrow. That's not little!"

He was through listening to Dumbledore's brand of bullshit, social responsibilities my arse! The old wizard just wanted to manipulate the media to his own ends, that was the job of the Prophet's editor. "We in the media don't make the news, we just report on it. That's our job and mine is to make sure the public read it, I need to sell papers." Peter thought that sounded so good, he almost believed it himself. "That's my job and I'm good at it, I suggest you leave and do yours. With your head of Slytherin about to be hanged, I would

have thought you would have more pressing needs on your time than standing there annoying me?"

Albus hated the smug look this asshole was wearing so decided to burst his bubble. "You are of course aware that they never found a body, you also know Voldemort performed many dark rituals on himself. The only logical conclusion left to draw is that he's not gone and will return. You might want to take that possibility under consideration when writing your headlines."

Albus had hoped to install a measure of fear in this little man, instead he suddenly became all business like. Peter was firing off questions quicker than a machine gun spat out bullets. "Can the Prophet quote you on this? Is there any indication of a timetable to his return? Don't you think it makes more sense to rid our community of his followers before he returns?"

The editor understood nothing sold papers like a campaign against something or someone that the public totally agreed with, this idea could be a goldmine! Peter was thinking out loud now, practically writing his editorial as he spoke. "We should also build-up the Auror Corps to be ready for him, confiscating the required funds from convicted death eaters could easily pay for it. Thank you for dropping by Mr Dumbledore, you have given me a lot to think on. If your boy doesn't get hanged today, we might just lead with that tomorrow."

It was a totally flummoxed Albus Dumbledore who left the Prophet building heading for the ministry, hoping he had better luck there. Dashing in to save the day, and the lovely Severus, was just what he needed to cheer himself up.

-oOoOo-

Barty had given the Wizarding Wireless Network's reporter time to set up while the Prophet snapper took photographs of the baying crowd before the head of the DMLE made his move. He conjured a platform before stepping up on it and raising his hands for silence. This was Barty's moment, when his life changed forever. This was not only throwing his hat into the ring for the soon to be vacant minister's job, Barty intended to blast any and all competitors away at the same time.

"Witches and wizards of Britain, could I have your attention please? I need to speak with you for a moment about what we hope to achieve here today."

A member of the crowd was quick to shout back, "We hope to put an end to a cowardly murdering bastard, surely you agree with that Barty?"

The crowd cheered madly before falling silent to hear Barty's answer. He kept them waiting, letting the tension build before giving his unexpected and unwelcome one word answer. "No!"

He let them rant, rave and vent for a few moments before holding up his hands for silence. "Let me clarify my position here. I don't want to put a permanent end to one cowardly murdering bastard, I want to permanently wipe out all the cowardly murdering bastards!"

A tumultuous cheer greeted this news as Barty began to play the crowd like a fine instrument, the tune they performed was music to his ears. "If we take this one death eater out and hang him then yes, we have permanently ended one threat. What about all the others? I will have this man leaking truth serum from his ears while we discover all the other death eaters he knows about. They will then be arrested and undergo the same treatment. All the trials will be public and their punishments dispensed in accordance with our laws. We've lived under the death eater's yoke of terror for too long, it's time to rid ourselves of this plague on our community. If that means facing up to hard choices, I for one am prepared to make them."

The cheering now was incredible. The masses were experiencing freedom from terror for the first time in years. That Barty Crouch wanted to make this freedom a permanent fixture in their lives was definitely something they wanted to hear, and would vote for.

Barty continued his speech, "Severus Snape is still unconscious from the injuries he received and will remain so for at least the next twenty four hours. Only when he recovers can we begin to reclaim our society from these evil people who need to hide behind masks. Go back to your homes or places of work, place your trust in the ministry to take care of the death eater problem. You have my promise I won't let you down!"

There was cheering and clapping before the crowd slowly began to disperse, many taking the time to greet Barty and shake his hand. A few words with the WWN reporter and some questions from the Prophet hack rounded his morning off nicely. That was until he noticed a fuming Dumbledore waiting on him, it would appear his speech didn't please everybody?

-oOoOo-

James currently held an excited Hermione in his arms, Lily had Dudley while Padfoot carried Harry. This left Remus free to look after Dan and Emma on their first trip via portkey. Frank and Alice had not only answered, with Voldemort gone they sent their location and a portkey so they could all visit. Neither of the young couples hadn't handled the isolation too well and were desperate to see each other again, Alice and Lily also couldn't wait to hug their godsons now this was all over.

James was doing everything in his power to keep his wife's mind on the positive, their visit to next door had definitely done that. They'd liked Bill and Tracy from the off but they fell in love with their home. The Victorian house was everything they could want in a home with bedrooms to spare, a massive back garden also made it perfect for raising a young family. James had already contacted the Potter lawyers to purchase the house as soon as possible, since the Jennings had already bought their dream cottage by the coast things should move quickly.

The same lawyers were already working on wrapping up the Dursley estate and putting the proceedings into a trust fund for Dudley, James had instantly decided to put the exact same amount away for Harry. He was consciously trying to make both of them as equal as he could from the very start. Vernon's sister had apparently made a claim for the money and custody of Dudley but his lawyers were totally confident it wouldn't reach court. The woman was unmarried with no experience of raising children, she was also financially inept with only handouts from her now dead brother keeping her head above water for years. Worse case scenario was pay a few thousand pounds compensation to have her drop the case, a price James would gladly pay to save Lily the trauma of appearing in court.

The lawyers were also handling all the Dursley funeral arrangements, that would be traumatic enough for her. Like so many

of their friends both Potters had lost almost all their family in this war, these wounds weren't going to heal overnight.

Introducing some new friends to their old friends was a small step in the healing process. With a quick check to see everyone was holding on to the portkey and ready, James used his wand to activate the piece of rope.

The group of three toddlers, two dentists, a witch and the marauders found themselves reappearing in the middle of a fierce battle that had spells flying everywhere.

A/N Thanks for reading.

## Chapter 4

Barty felt as if his soul was becoming lost while staring into the smoky liquid that was swirling around in the bottom of his glass, perhaps it was just wishful thinking since he knew that becoming lost was simply not an option available to him at the moment. Barty was struggling to reconcile not only what he'd done but what he'd become, it was incredible to think that two conversations could turn your entire world on its head.

Dumbledore had started the ball rolling when he demanded a word somewhere they couldn't be overheard, they had no sooner made Barty's office when an angry Dumbledore got straight to the point. He wanted Severus Snape released into his care and all thoughts of questioning under Veritaserum dropped immediately. Barty was about to refuse this out of hand, brushing off the old man's claims that Severus was his spy, when the bombshell dropped. The words were imprinted on Barty's brain. 'When you grant this accommodation, I will support your claim that your son filled the same role for you. What? Surely you were aware that Bartemius Junior is a death eater?'

Barty wanted to punch the smirk of the old bastards face, instead he was forced to listen as Dumbledore twisted the knife. 'I will of course also support your bid for the upcoming Minister of Magic post, one must always look after their friends! I shall be here to collect my boy in the morning, that will give you a chance to have a chat with your son. After all, we'll need to get our stories straight.'

Barty couldn't even think straight, far less arrange stories to corroborate with each other. He also couldn't wait to get home and discover the truth from his son's lips, the vial of truth serum in his pocket would ensure the truth was what he got.

Barty now believed the truth to be a beautiful and terrible thing, and should therefore be treated with caution. No one but he could ever learn of it. His son was not just a death eater, he was a psychotic follower of the dark lord who refused to believe his master was dead. That he was eagerly anticipating taking part in his first death eater raid tonight told Barty all he needed to know. Memory charms could deal with specific events but would not handle changing someone's attitude, that took professional healers and months of work. Neither of these options were available to Barty at the moment, they weren't



provided in Azkaban either. Azkaban would be where his son would be heading the instant the Wizengamot heard his tirades against everyone not a death eater.

Barty tried to console himself with the fact that his actions were not purely driven by the detrimental effect this discovery would have on his career, his son being sent to Azkaban would finish his very ill wife. He could not allow that to happen, Victoria had given him the best years of her life, she shouldn't have to spend her final months worrying about her son rotting in Azkaban. For this he was prepared to cast an unforgivable on his son, he just couldn't see any other alternative within the time constraints he was being forced to work under.

His wife would undoubtedly be broken hearted but at least it would be a clean break. Far better that than the pain associated from the realisation she had given birth to a monster. Barty would do anything to ease his wife's pain. His plan would also have the added benefit of getting him out from under Dumbledore's control, Severus Snape was going down hard!

Barty already knew how he was going to play the incident as he sat with his untouched glass of firewhisky, he needed a clear head tonight. He was expecting the floo call at any moment, then he would have the odious task of breaking the tragic news to Victoria. Only after that would he be able to drink the liquid oblivion he was currently nursing in his hand.

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Tom saw the young man arrive by floo and his hand automatically reached for a glass, it was a requirement of his job to know his customers preferences. "The usual Barty?"

"Sorry Tom, can't stop tonight. Got somewhere I need to be."

Tom's wide leering grin might have looked better with a few more teeth in his mouth, though if the new teeth were white, the grin would more resemble a piano's keyboard than a mouth. "Hot date eh? Do I know the lucky girl?"

The young man shook his head as he made his way toward the muggle exit of the Leaky Cauldron. "Now Tom, you know a gentleman never tells."

The bartender was still smiling to himself about young Barty's parting quip when he heard the loud commotion emanating from the muggle side of his pub. He carefully stuck his head around the pub door to discover some young man had walked right in front of a London bus and was now under it. Even from here Tom could tell that this was a non-survivable accident, once again he was amazed that the muggles could build these machines but not charm them to avoid running into each other or anyone else. Ernie Prang could hardly see further than the end of his nose yet the knight bus had never had an accident.

Tom went back to tending his bar and would only later discover that he was the very last person to speak with Bartemius Crouch Jr. before the young man had his terrible accident.

-oOoOo-

"C'mon Roddy, the little shit isn't gonna show. Told you he didn't have the balls for a real raid, he's all talk that one."

Rodolphus could only shake his head at his wife's eagerness. "Bella dearest, content yourself. We'll get there soon enough. Just try savouring the anticipation of tonight, it will make it so much better for you when we get there."

Rabastan smiled at his sister-in-law, thinking once more that Roddy sure picked himself a wild one. "Yeah Bella, think about it. Even if the kid doesn't have what it takes, it gives the Longbottoms another target to aim at. If they're firing curses at him then it gives us a better shot at taking them down."

Bella wasn't in the mood to wait any longer. "Three Lestranges are more than a match for anything waiting for us in that house. I vote we go now and then deal with that coward Junior later."

Rodolphus only required a glance to see his wife was really on the edge, he still had to show her who was in charge though. "Easy there my lovely Bellatrix. We will allow five more minutes for our

young friend to appear before we commence with tonight's operation. You can then vent your frustrations on people worthy of your ire."

Bella nodded, she would wait but only for five minutes. Her lord was supposedly gone and she wanted some answers. She also wanted someone to pay, that someone was going to be the Longbottoms.

-oOoOo-

Frank wasn't overly concerned when the ward's tingled at a portkey entering them, the dark lord was no more and they were expecting company. They were not expecting a trio of death eaters bursting in with wands already firing spells. Alice was on the floor playing with their son when Bellatrix hit her with the cruciatus curse, her screams of pain reverberated off the walls. Frank had his hands full fighting off Rodolphus and Rabastan, his wife's screams were driving him insane but he couldn't get to her aid without suffering the same fate. These three death eaters were all very experienced at this and Frank's attacks were becoming more and more desperate as spells were now flying everywhere.

It was into this scene that their friends arrived and immediately burst into action.

James was the only one with his wand in his hand since he'd activated the portkey, he also had Hermione in his other arm but didn't hesitate for a second. The safety of everyone here could only be guaranteed by putting these three down as quickly as possible, with four children here this was not the time for stunners or wasted calls of 'aurors - surrender your wands'. A curse into the back of the nearest death eater was immediately followed by tossing Hermione to her thankfully alert and waiting father.

Sirius was standing next to Emma and the woman practically ripped Harry from his arms, allowing the auror to join the fight. Remus was busy transfiguring furniture into walls and neither Granger needed to be told what to do next, both were soon behind the walls and trying to protect the children with their bodies. Lily and Dudley soon joined them before she used her wand to summon her godson. With Dudley and Neville quickly passed to the Grangers and safely hidden behind the transfigured walls, the young witch took over the defensive duties thus freeing Remus to join the fight.

Sirius had started firing curses at his cousin the instant his wand was in his hand, with Remus joining him it was only stray or deflected curses Lily had to be on her guard for now. Neither of the two remaining death eaters had any time to waste firing curses in the children's direction, they were far too busy fighting for their very lives. As Bella came under the combined onslaught of Remus and Sirius, she was being forced further and further back as she dodged spells.

Sirius wanted to ensure Bellatrix kept her full attention on him and Remus, there were currently four kids, two muggles and a witch lying on the floor that were all defenceless. This called for a little taunting. "Hello cousin, up to your old tricks again I see! What master are you following now that shit for brains Voldemort got his arse handed to him?"

"Don't you dare speak my master's name! A blood traitor like you is unworthy of having that pass your lips."

Sirius knew what buttons to press with Bella and could see it was working so kept it up. "I don't even want to think about where your lips have been cuz, never figured a Black would ever be an ass-kisser. Then again, when you marry into scum I suppose a sharp fall in standards has to be expected. At least your sister Cissi manages to keep her nose up in the air while living with filth, thank Merlin for Andi!"

Bella was now solely focused on killing this blood traitor of the Black name, so focused that she totally missed the real danger. Alice lay there forgotten and not as defenceless as Sirius thought, she'd managed to draw her wand. Her limbs were shaking so bad though that firing a curse might miss this bitch and hit one of her friends. The death eater was getting closer and Alice judged her moment well, as Bella dodged a spell from Remus she was now almost within touching distance of the witch lying shaking on the floor. Alice could hardly miss as she fired a reducto curse into the back of Bellatrix's left knee, blowing the leg right off and putting the crazy bitch down. A stunner from Sirius made sure she stayed there as he raced over to defend Alice and cast a protective shield. Remus now joined the fight on the remaining death eater still standing.

The first indication Rodolphus got that the tide had turned was when his brother took a bludgeoning hex to his unprotected back. It was

only seconds later that he found himself heavily outnumbered. Tactics and common sense dictated he should apparate out of there, only this wasn't just two other death eaters that were down but his wife and brother. This caused him to hesitate and, with three powerful wizards now firing curses at him, his hesitation proved very costly. As he dodged a curse from James, Remus and Frank both caught him and the fight was over.

Rodolphus had hardly hit the floor before Lily was racing toward her injured friend, Alice was barely hanging onto consciousness but refused to give in until she knew her boy was safe. "Neville, my Neville, where's my baby?"

Lily was trying to comfort her friend but it was only when Emma brought Neville over for Alice to see he was alright that Alice settled down. Emma was looking on in horror. "What kind of magic does that to a person?"

Lily had her friend's head in her lap and running her hand over her brow. "The darkest kind of magic there is. It's a torture curse that causes every nerve ending in the body to fire off messages of pain to the brain. You can go insane from the unbelievable agony after just a few minutes exposure to this vile piece of magic, you'll be dead after ten. It's classed as an unforgivable and is a one-way ticket to prison. You'll notice that we're in no hurry to heal the bitch that cast it."

Frank was currently taking Neville from Emma and kneeling beside his wife, "I'm so sorry love, I kept trying to get to you but they were firing curse after curse to stop me."

Alice held up her shaking hand to touch both her boys on the cheek, "Our baby is ok, nothing else matters next to that." Alice turned to the unknown woman, "Thank you for looking after my boy for me."

Lily handled the introductions, "Emma, this is Frank and Alice Longbottom, my godson Neville you've already met. Her husband Dan is keeping the other three kids safe behind the barrier Remus came up with. This is not the introduction I intended but we live in dangerous times!"

Emma was watching in astonishment as the unconscious female death eater joined the other two in being enveloped in magical ropes

by Sirius and James while Remus stopped her from bleeding to death by magically sealing her stump.

The last few minutes had been something else for the two dentists. "Dangerous times? I honestly believed you when you told me, I could have done without the practical demonstration!"

Lily smiled at her new friend, Emma was made of the right stuff. James gestured over to the Longbottoms, "Frank, Alice needs to get to St. Mungo's as quickly as possible. Don't worry about Neville, we'll take care of him until she gets back home."

Sirius interrupted and handed Frank a scrap of parchment, "My crazy cousin had this in her pocket, I thought you might be interested in it?"

Frank recognised the significance at once, it was their address written in his mother's handwriting. "There were only two of these made and Remus got the other one from mother earlier today."

The wizard in question took his piece of parchment from his pocket and it was a perfect match. James had finished searching and securing the other two death eaters, when he saw the two pieces of parchment, their fears appeared to have been justified. "Let me guess who you gave the other one to, Albus Dumbledore?"

Frank could only nod as he held his wife and son, the realisation of what almost happened beginning to sink in. Emma couldn't understand why that scrap of parchment was so important but recognised this wasn't the time to ask. Dan was keeping the other three kids behind the barriers so they didn't see the devastation that was out here. The room was wrecked and there was a lot of blood from the missing limb. Seeing that Frank was struggling with his emotions, James took command of the situation.

"Frank, you get Alice to the hospital. Neville will be well taken care of. Sirius and I will drop these animals off at the ministry before contacting your mother, we'll see she gets to St Mungo's. Remus and Lily can get everyone else back to the house, we'll be back as soon as we can."

Lily definitely wanted to get the kids out of there as soon as possible so kissed her husband before taking Neville from Frank. Alice

attempted to smile at her but it came across as a grimace. "Take care of my baby!"

"You know I will, just take care of yourself and we'll bring him to see you tomorrow."

Remus reset the rope portkey for the Grangers home as Emma picked up Dudley, Dan had Hermione and Harry cuddling into him with neither child looking like letting go any time soon. Remus made sure Lily and Emma were holding on tightly before he placed his hand clutching the portkey on Dan's shoulder and activated it.

It was a relief for the remaining adults to know the children were now safe. Sirius quickly made a portkey for St Mungo's, sending Frank and Alice on their way.

They had no sooner left when Sirius asked James the all-important question, "So how did the death eaters get a hold of that?"

"You know as well as me it would only happen if Dumbledore wanted it to, I hardly think he would leave it lying about. The old man may play up on his eccentricities yet he's anything but stupid. There's a reason behind everything he does, the reason might only make sense to him but you can be sure he'll have one."

Sirius then noticed Bella's leg lying amongst the carnage, "My mother has a troll's leg she uses as an umbrella stand, I wonder if she'd want her favourite niece's to make a pair?"

The adrenalin was leaving their systems now and joking about was the way they handled it. "Well I think it's a safe bet Alice won't want to hang it above the mantelpiece, you're welcome to it!" Both aurors were chuckling as the tension from the unexpected battle left. "They were very lucky we arrived Padfoot, Alice was down and Frank was about to join her. Even five minutes later could have been too late!"

That was a bit too serious for Sirius at the moment, he was still in his jokey stage. "You know Prancer, I don't think we'll be getting anything for Christmas this year. With the luck we've been carrying lately, I think we would have a pure cheek to ask for anything more."

James could only shake his head, he'd been Prongs since he was fifteen and now a two-year-old had changed it. The fact that his wife,

Remus and Sirius thought it was bloody hilarious kind of sealed his fate. "Let's get these three to the ministry and then we can deal with the rest of our business. I won't settle until we're back at the Grangers."

-oOoOo-

Barty finally got a floo call from the ministry, just not the one he was expecting. "Barty, the three Lestranges attacked the Longbottoms tonight. Luckily Frank and Alice were expecting company and they arrived in time to make the difference. James Potter and Sirius Black brought them in."

The head of the DMLE's professionalism kicked-in. "Was anyone injured and what condition are the prisoners in?"

"Alice Longbottom is in St Mungo's being treated for exposure to the cruciatus and everyone else is unharmed. As to the Lestranges', there were apparently four kids in the house so the death eaters were put down hard. They won't be fit to go dancing this weekend but we should still be able to ram some truth serum down their throats."

That was all Barty needed to hear, "I'll be right there!"

-oOoOo-

It was a pretty rattled group that made it back to the Grangers. Since it contained four crying toddlers and they were all leaving the scene of a battle, they really couldn't be anything else but rattled. Dan sat on the sofa with Harry and Hermione drawing comfort from each other on his lap. Emma and her toddler headed straight for the kitchen, with Dudley this upset nothing but food would calm the child down. Lily sat with Neville on her knee as she used her most calming voice on her godson while holding him close, he snuggled in and his sobs began to abate.

Emma returned with a now content Dudley, the bowl of melon pieces calming him quicker than words ever could. She plonked him, and his tightly clutched bowl, onto Remus's lap before heading back to the kitchen. She returned with a tray containing three more bowls as she attempted to coax Neville to speak. "Hello Neville, I'm Emma. That's my little girl over there with Harry and you can see by how



quickly Dudley is polishing his melon off that this is good. Would you like some?"

Hermione wasn't forgetting her manners, it was her experience from the last time that made her reluctant to do that again. Harry though jumped down off her father's knee and led her over to the new boy by the hand. Harry remembered this boy though hadn't seen him for a while. He attempted to copy his best friend but didn't yet possess the necessary vocabulary skills to pull it off. Still, it got the job done. "Nev, Hermi! He Dud, sit?"

Harry and Hermione then helped him off Lily's knee as her wand created another chair at the kids' table for her godson. Emma placed the bowls down and helped the kids to sit, she then sat Dudley at the table and had a quiet word in his ear. "Be a good boy and Auntie Em will give you more when you're finished."

Dudley was well acquainted with the word 'more' so was on his best behaviour.

Dan casually asked Remus a question, the adrenalin was still coursing through his body but he didn't want the kids becoming upset again. They would all have to keep their behaviour nice and calm for now. "I take it those three were some of these terrorists we've heard so much about? Did I hear Sirius saying he was related to one of them?"

"Yes, those were death eaters. Some of the most fanatical actually, the woman is his cousin and without question one of the worst of them. She kills and tortures for fun!"

Emma was struggling to understand this whole concept of death eaters yet was careful to keep her voice at a conversational level and tone. "I find it hard to believe Sirius could be related to someone like that, he seems the exact opposite!"

It was Lily who answered, "That's probably because he is. The Blacks are what's considered a dark family, defiantly no pun intended. They all, bar a few buy into these beliefs that purebloods are better than everyone else. We have a perfect example of why this is a load of crap sitting right in front of us. Neville is a pureblood wizard, though the Longbottoms are like the Potters and considered light. My Harry is a half blood, your Hermione is a muggle born while

Dudley is a muggle. The kids certainly don't know any different and won't unless someone teaches them otherwise."

The four in question were sitting around the small table, eating their melon and chatting as only children of that age can. They were totally unaware that they were now the centre of attention and the scene was heart warming for the watching adults.

Dan was now struggling to keep his voice at the required level. "Differentiating between children like that is absurd, appalling and many other names I can't say in case the kids pick them up. You might as well have people feeling superior because they have blood type O, it makes no sense!"

Lily couldn't help but chuckle at that analogy, "Actually that would make more sense, at least blood type is a physical thing you can measure. Apart from Dudley being non-magical, there is no physical test to tell the difference between the other three's blood status. That maybe down to the fact that there is no difference. To a death eater, three of the children sitting there don't deserve to live. Actually, make that all four of them since they class the Longbottoms as blood traitors."

Dan was struggling to come to terms with a society that considered his daughter a lesser being, one not fit to live. "Man has been fighting with each other since they first walked upright on the earth, whether it was over land, religion or the best mate to breed with. I suppose it was too much to ask that witches and wizards would be any different, they could at least have came up with something a bit more substantial to fight over."

Emma remembered something from earlier and wanted to ask for an explanation. "What was the significance of that slip of paper, it appeared to be very important but for the life of me I couldn't understand why."

Remus took out his scrap of parchment and handed it to Dan. "Try and copy what's written there."

Dan was sure he was being pranked, that was until he realised he couldn't do it. Every attempt he had at it provided him with a different address, not the one on the paper though.

Remus explained the phenomenon. "Only the secret keeper can write that address down, you won't be able to copy it or tell anyone else about it. That's why it was so important, only someone shown that bit of paper could have found the Longbottoms."

Lily was nodding in agreement, "Apparently Frank's mother made only two of these, the other one was in the possession of Albus Dumbledore. You can bet your life she will be asking Dumbledore for an explanation of how it came to be in the possession of three of the most vicious death eaters there is. We made a mistake in our choice of secret keeper, Frank and Alice didn't. There is not one shred of doubt in anyone's mind that Augusta Longbottom would have chosen death rather than betray her family!"

Lily and Remus suddenly had their wands in their hands as the sound of apparition was heard. A shout of 'It's me darling.' coming from the hall in James's voice saw them relax. He entered the room, kissed his wife and then sat down with the kids.

"Sirius is staying at St Mungo's just in case any more death eaters show up, Barty sent over a couple of aurors but Frank and Alice still feel better knowing he's there. I think Augusta is hoping a few death eaters do decide to pay her family another visit, she's ready to wipe the floor with them. I thought we were going to have to magically restrain the old battleaxe when Sirius showed her that slip of paper we took from Bellatrix, she was all for heading straight to Hogwarts the instant she saw her family was ok. Only Frank saying he wanted both him and Alice to be there delayed the inevitable."

"How long will Alice be in the hospital?" Emma asked.

"She may get out tomorrow or, at most, the day after. I hope you don't mind if Neville stays here until then?"

Emma could see how her original question could be misconstrued and sought to reassure. "Of course not, he's very welcome. I just hope that when we get to meet Mia and Mary we don't end up in the middle of a battle again!"

The four kids stopped eating and chatting just long enough to stare at all the adults laughing – grown-ups were such strange creatures!

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This was the part Barty was dreading, it was never easy telling a mother they'd lost a child. When the mother in question was your wife and you had personally orchestrated your son's death, there wasn't really a word strong enough to describe how he was feeling. The story he was going to tell his wife was the one that he had already laid the foundation for earlier tonight. He would keep the department so busy that their son's case would soon be forgotten amongst the carnage they were going to create, the story he spun would soon become fact in the eyes of everyone who mattered.

They had started their interrogations with the two brothers and both had quickly mentioned Barty Junior as being a death eater, he'd calmly written out the arrest order for his son along with the others named. Within the hour word had come back that his son was dead, the muggle aurors were writing it up as a suicide. The department held its collective breath as Barty finally spoke.

"It would seem my son, like many young men before him, made a grave mistake that he clearly deeply regretted. Faced with the prospect of being forced to take part in his first death eater attack, he would appear to have taken his own life instead. From what we've learned so far, his level of involvement as a death eater would probably have seen him spend some months in Azkaban before being free to continue with his life. Instead he's now lying in a muggle mortuary."

Barty was no longer acting as his emotions shone through his mask of untouchability. "I feel as if I've failed my son in that he couldn't come to me for help, I now have to go home and tell his mother her only son is gone. Please continue arresting those death eaters named by the Lestrangle brothers and we'll get truth serum into Bellatrix and Snape as soon as the healers allow us. I shall return tomorrow."

With that he had left, knowing that all the high profile arrests they were going to make would see his son's death relegated to a mere footnote in history. Barty entered their bedroom, "Hello love, I'm sorry but I've got some bad news."

-oOoOo-

Albus had many friends inside the ministry and news of the death eater purge soon reached his ears, he was about to floo to the ministry in an attempt to curtail the damage being done to their society when Barty Crouch Junior's unfortunate fate was mentioned. He quickly checked with another two sources before believing the rumour to be true.

Albus almost wrecked his office as his temper knew no bounds, he had been sure the situation had been well taken care of and now he was left exposed. He'd known Barty Crouch senior could be a ruthless bastard but this action took that ruthlessness to a new extreme. Albus didn't even consider the possibility that the young Barty could have taken his own life, his father was somehow responsible for his untimely death. Not only that, Barty Senior was sure to blame Albus for forcing the parent into his decision, using Severus to take his revenge was a foregone conclusion.

There was also no doubting the harm that Severus answering questions under veritaserum could do to one Albus Dumbledore, he would be lucky to dodge a dementor's kiss and end up in Azkaban. No, Albus was being forced into making the same decision as Barty had. someone he loved was going to have to be sacrificed for the greater good. The young man known as Severus Snape was tragically going to suffer heart failure before regaining consciousness, it was also going to happen tonight.

With all the extra activity at the ministry, it should be a piece of cake for Albus to slip in there while invisible and cast the obscure spell that would stop his potion master's heart. Albus knew he couldn't be turning dark because his heart was breaking at his decision, and there was no spell to help with that. As long as he could cry tears of sorrow and regret his actions then his soul was safe, he was certainly crying now.

A/N Thanks for reading

## Chapter 5

Albus had rendered himself invisible as he silently sneaked through the ministry, he had considered using the Potter invisibility cloak but had rejected that idea. He settled instead for a powerful disillusionment charm. It was three a.m. yet the graveyard shift appeared to be anything but dull this morning, aurors were everywhere as Barty must have called the entire corps in for this. He supposed it made sense to arrest as many suspected death eaters as possible before the word broke and people had time to flee. Albus would have his work cut out curtailing Barty from having them all kissed, the man had no forgiveness in him whatsoever. His only son being a case in point, Dumbledore just couldn't see the hypocrisy in that thought. When it was his glowing reputation that was threatened, he was about to commit pre-meditated murder on someone he cared deeply for so they couldn't be questioned under truth serum. He was Albus Dumbledore thought so that made him, and of course his deeds correct.

Four aurors were in the process of dragging Lucius and Narcissa Malfoy in the direction of the holding cells, a female officer followed on behind carrying their still sleeping son. Someone must have cast a spell on the toddler because his parents were making enough noise to wake the dead. These conditions were as good as the old wizard was going to get as all the attention was focused on the blond couple who were swearing to end multiple ministerial careers for this atrocity being carried out on them.

Even with the Malfoy soap opera paying out for everyone's entertainment, Albus still had a difficult and dangerous job on his hands. Barty had the prisoners well guarded and the cells were filling up, he would need to find Severus first before he could carry out his gruesome task and then escape unnoticed. This was not going to be the stroll in the park he imagined when he first contemplated this scenario.

His only option was to slowly and silently slightly open the small feeding hatch on each cell door without alerting the guards, this could easily take all night. The old wizard caught a major break though, the first opening he peered through had a wizard with long jet black hair lying on the cot with his back to Albus. He'd found Severus in the first cell. He carefully slipped his wand tip into the opening and fired the curse that would still his potion master's heart

forever. He was certain he was successful but had no time for congratulating himself as an alarm sounded throughout the cell complex.

Albus didn't know if the alarm had been triggered because his curse had been detected inside the cell or perhaps linked to Severus's health, what he did know was that he was in a lot of trouble and had to act fast. If they sealed the floor before he could escape then he was done for. Albus used the imperious curse on the nearest auror and commanded him to start firing stunners at his fellow auror guards. The ensuing battle may have been short and distinctly one sided but the ruse accomplished its aim, create confusion and allow Albus just enough time to slip past undetected before they sealed the complex. He was soon out of the ministry building and apparating back to Scotland, he'd more than earned his nightcap tonight.

He would also need a stiff one to console himself that Severus Snape was no more, he could now turn his mind to composing a fitting eulogy to the man who had made his old heart beat faster just by being in the same room.

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Barty was furious when he was informed of the intrusion into his department, he was also pretty sure he could put a name to the intruder. He had administered a dreamless sleep potion to Victoria earlier and now was forced to leave Winky to look after her mistress while he headed for the ministry. The investigation had barely begun when they discovered their colleague had been under the imperious curse, unlike the people they'd been arresting all night, the auror's explanation was accepted as the truth. It had with hindsight been nothing more than a diversionary tactic to allow the perpetrator to escape, Barty was forced to admit a tactic that had worked brilliantly. It was a certainty that the intruder had carried out the deed while under an invisibility cloak or under a disillusionment charm.

The head of the DMLE would have given anything to have caught Dumbledore in the act, there were a few things that the sly old fox was aware of and Barty intended to use them to bring him down. The Lestrage brothers had both confirmed that Snape had provided the address of the Longbottoms, something that had Frank out for blood. He'd quickly rubbished any thoughts of Severus

Snape being anywhere near their home, far less treating their son. Barty's plan was to have Dumbledore attempt to cover his arse with excuses before ensuring the old bastard got shafted. Publicly bringing down Dumbledore could be every bit as dangerous as rounding up the death eaters but he didn't care anymore.

Barty Crouch knew his wife was dying and had lost his son to death eaters and Dumbledore, he intended to dedicate his life to ensuring they all paid for their crimes. He intended to use the wizarding justice system to achieve that but, if he found himself thwarted, Barty would resort to other measures. He'd more than crossed a line by casting an unforgivable curse on his son and ordering him to kill himself, a bit of Barty died as well and he didn't really like the person who was left behind. When his wife eventually passed away, all he would have left was his determination to ensure these people suffered as he had. It wasn't much but it was all he had.

-oOoOo-

Walburga Black was a formidable lady with a thoroughly deserved reputation as a witch you crossed at your peril. The junior clerk left manning the ministry desk that included child placement office on the graveyard shift never really stood a chance. It would be scant consolation to the young man but none of his superiors would have fared much better, he soldiered on gamely though.

"Madam Black, you must understand. I just can't hand over a child as if you were purchasing lunch at the Leaky Cauldron. There are procedures in place that must be followed and checks required to be made."

The old witch was relentless though, "Well, get on with it then! Follow your procedures and you will find that care of that boy will fall to me. I am the closest family he has left and I won't stand to see him spending any more time in this place than necessary."

The stressed clerk was left with no option but to search through the records, hoping for something that he could use to delay a decision until one of his superiors could deal with the terrifying old witch's demands in the morning. The toddler was clearly the last of the Malfoy line so no help there, the Black side of the family though threw up a couple of names that might provide at least a delay.



"The boy has an Aunt Andromeda whose claim on the child would be greater than yours."

Walburga immediately pissed all over that suggestion. "That bitch betrayed her family and was cast out. She married a muggleborn and they now live in the muggle world. This boy will be the head of the Malfoy and Black families, do you think for one instant I would stand back and watch a proud pureblood child being raised in the muggle world?"

Unfortunately the clerk had more bad news for her. "Madam Black, the official head of the Black family is your son Sirius Orion Black. He also has a stronger claim to raise the boy than you do."

Walburga's temper knew no bounds. "That's impossible! He was cast out of the family, I have no son."

The clerk didn't want to disagree with this crazy witch but was forced to. "Your husband filed the paperwork to make Regulus his heir but never filed any papers to remove Sirius from the family. Sirius Orion Black has been head of the Black family for almost two years, since both your husband and son died within months of each other."

She was beyond furious now. "Get me the necessary paperwork, I'll disinherit him right now! I will not have that mongrel as head of my family."

The clerk really didn't want to tell her the next bit but again was forced to by his job. "I'm sorry madam but you should know the Black family is patriarchal. No woman can assume head of it, therefore I am unable to grant your request. Your son is head of the Black family and there's nothing you or I can do about it. He also has a much stronger claim on the child of his cousin so any decision on the child's placement will have to be deferred until he's been consulted." The young clerk was feeling quite pleased with himself, not believing he could be in any danger in the middle of the ministry. "I'm very sorry you appear to have had a wasted journey and can only suggest you contact my superiors in the morning."

An ice cold expression had settled over Walburga's features which should have warned the young man that all was not well. "I shall be certain to tell them how much help you have been to me." Her wand

flashed into her hand and the curse hit the unsuspecting clerk.  
"Imperio!"

The clerk was now bent to her will as she proceeded to give him instructions she wanted carried out without delay. Walburga was well aware Black family magic would prevent her from ordering the head of the family changed, she was gambling it wouldn't affect her claiming the boy. "You will complete the documents confirming me as Draco Malfoy's guardian until such time as his parents are once more able to undertake their responsibilities. I will then sign these papers and you will file them in the proper manner, now be quick about it. I am anxious to get the boy away from people who would prosecute purebloods for simply killing a few muggles for sport."

Walburga Black would ensure that Draco Malfoy was brought up to respect proper wizarding traditions, with the boy's bloodlines he could someday rule their world. It was also imperative that she visit Gringotts tomorrow. She desperately needed to discover why she could still live at Grimmaud Place with her disappointment of a son as head of the family. Was it possible he didn't know he was head of the Black Family? Walburga needed to discover some answers, and quickly.

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That morning's edition of the Daily Prophet once more rocked their reader's worlds, this time for a totally different reason. News of the attack on the Longbottoms was being ruthlessly suppressed to give aurors as much time as possible to arrest any death eaters named. Since Severus Snape had narrowly escaped being hanged, Peter White had kept his word and led with Dumbledore's revelations. The headline terrified witches and wizards the length and breadth of the country, it also played directly into Barty Crouch's hands.

The Dark Lord – Gone for good or merely on vacation?

Yesterday the offices of the Daily Prophet were graced by a visit from our esteemed Chief Warlock and Hogwarts Headmaster, Albus Dumbledore. The old wizard was concerned that this newspaper's stance on the death eaters could encourage vigilantes to seek their own form of justice and vengeance.

He also forcefully expressed his opinion that Voldemort may one day return. His reasoning behind this extraordinary claim was that the dark lord had undergone numerous dark rituals and, apparently, there are some that would protect him in this situation. Dumbledore also claimed that no body being found added credence to this opinion. Why the Chief Warlock chose to inform the Daily Prophet rather than the relevant department at the ministry is a mystery that only Albus Dumbledore knows the answer to.

The Daily Prophet also had trouble understanding his conclusion that the paper should lean more toward leniency for Voldemort's followers because of this. Let us state clearly here that would go against everything the Daily Prophet stands for.

We at the Daily Prophet think that the slightest possibility of the dark lord making a reappearance creates an immensely strong case for the ministry dealing with as many of his followers as possible, and quickly as the great Albus Dumbledore couldn't suggest a timetable for this event to take place. There should be no sympathy for these witches and wizards who proudly hid behind their death eater masks and their former master, only justice. They made their choice and now must pay, pay in ways they never thought possible.

Our country should not be found wanting again, it should also send the clearest signal possible to those that might be tempted to join this or any other aspiring dark lord what the cost they will pay is. As well as securing convicted death eaters in Azkaban for a long time, their vaults should also be emptied of gold. This windfall could then be used to fund the growth of our hard pressed auror force. Let's face facts here, the convicted death eaters won't be needing it where they are going and it also takes funding away from a returning Voldemort.

With all his followers safely locked away in Azkaban and their redistributed wealth beefing up the auror corps, a returning dark lord wouldn't be nearly as effective in his megalomaniacal crusade to have the entire world bow before him. Perhaps next time he could even be finished off for good? Rest assured, the Daily Prophet will keep its readers informed of any and all developments. We look forward to the Chief Warlock being questioned by his fellow members of the Wizengamot.

Barty Crouch couldn't help but think the fates were finally helping him, he expected the ministry to be again inundated with owls today. That he could honestly say that the ministry was actually doing what the vast majority of these owls were demanding should ease him into the vacant minister's chair when Bagnold retired in December. The current minister had decided to retire before Voldemort made that decision a permanent one, retired rather than deceased was what she was aiming for. Today's Prophet would ensure Millicent didn't consider changing her mind. The Daily Prophet had also changed dramatically since the demise of the dark lord, publically attacking death eaters last week would have seen the building burned to the ground with the staff locked inside. Their brave stance was making the entire wizarding community of Britain take a good look at themselves, something that boded well for their country.

The public backlash against Dumbledore would also set the old wizard up for the blows Barty intended to rain down upon him. He was heading to St. Mungo's to see if the Longbottoms were ready to travel to Hogwarts and confront the headmaster, Barty intended to invite himself along. He was going to make this phase one of his new bringing down Dumbledore strategy. The youth of Britain's magical world attended Hogwarts from the age of eleven to eighteen. They were there to be educated and return home as adult witches and wizards, not to be recruited by death eaters and branded like cattle. Barty would admit he failed his son but also felt there was enough blame to go around. If he became minister, he would ensure that Hogwarts actually met their duty of care. No parent should ever be put in the position that he was.

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James was watching the little bodies entwined while sleeping and really couldn't help but smile, he was joined in the doorway by Lily carrying Neville. "I know they look cute but you were supposed to wake them, not stand there grinning like the village idiot. You know Harry can be a handful in the morning and takes time to wake up."

James could clearly hear the amusement in Lily's voice and knew he wasn't in any trouble, that was until he said the first thing that came into his head. "If you think he's a handful in the morning, wait until you try to separate those two!"

Lily's maternal instincts kicked in at once, "What do you mean? Is there something you're not telling me?"

James tried to explain his thoughts, "I know Harry is going to be a powerful wizard, from what you've told me Hermione is set to be a powerful witch too. I think their magic made a connection that morning in the waiting room. How else do you explain them being instantly so comfortable with each other?"

Lily was now staring at the two sleeping children with different eyes, "What does that mean or what do you think it will mean for them?"

"I think they will always be close, 'bestist' friends at the very least. That was one of the reasons I bought the house next to this one. I was please to see them both quite happily playing with Dudley and Neville as I was worried they could have ended up focusing on each other and ignoring everyone else. It's far too early to say yet but we could be looking at our future daughter-in-law lying there."

Lily was astonished at this news, she understood how unusual the events of that morning were but to go from that to marriage was quite a leap. "Are you sure and what do we do about it?"

"No I'm not sure and we do absolutely nothing! We just let nature and magic take their course and keep a close eye on them."

Lily nodded before asking her next question, "What do we say to Dan and Emma?"

James placed his arm around his wife, "At the moment, nothing. You've known about magic for ten years and still have trouble accepting what I'm saying, the Grangers haven't known about this for ten days. They're coping remarkably well but that might be a step too far at the moment. There's nothing to be gained from worrying them with this just now, let's leave it a while and see how the kids are."

"Should we be worried about this?"

Dan had a wide grin on his face now, "If our Harry eventually marries his childhood sweetheart, a girl we've watched growing up with him, I for one will be a very happy and proud parent!"

"Well I think the proud parent should get in there and wake them, Emma will have their breakfast ready shortly."

Emma was currently in the hall behind them. She was wondering what as keeping their guests this morning and had heard most of what had been said. She was annoyed that she and Dan weren't going to be told but then understood James's reasoning. They were still only toddlers and, from what she was hearing, even James wasn't sure about this. He wanted to let the kids grow without any interference in whatever their relationship was or would be, Emma was in complete agreement with that. If it did eventually lead to them spending their lives together then all four parents would have had many years to get to know their child's intended spouse. Emma found that idea quite appealing, she turned and left before any of the Potters spotted her there.

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Albus had decided he would be spending most of today in his office, the Prophet article had seen to that. Perhaps he should pay Peter White another visit, show the man why Albus Dumbledore should not be ridiculed. The knowledge that the paper would never have printed a derogatory word against Voldemort while he still lived really rankled, because Albus was perceived as 'light' he was classed as fair game because he wouldn't turn up in the middle of the night and kill all their families in their beds. Just another cross he had to bear with his many positions of power and responsibility. Albus also expected a confrontation with Barty at some point today, that was one confrontation he didn't want an audience for. Unfortunately for Albus, Barty brought one with him.

With Alice being released, Barty gave them the option of him accompanying them to Hogwarts in an official capacity to see if Dumbledore had a case to answer. Alice wasn't keen but when Sirius produced his mirror and she could see via James her son was not only safe but playing happily with three other children, she relented. Sirius also invited himself along to Hogwarts and had arranged to take the Longbottoms directly to Neville when they finished their business in the castle.

As Minerva led the group into the headmaster's office, Albus didn't even get time to dismiss his deputy before Frank got the ball rolling. Everyone could see how angry the man was and even Minerva had

to admit he had a very good reason to be, Albus was aware this would be all over the staffroom before dinner tonight.

"Perhaps you would care to explain to us how the slip of parchment with our secret address written on it came to be in the possession of Bellatrix Lestrangle? I can't believe we actually trusted you!"

Albus was stalling for time as he tried to figure out how to get out from under this axe that was now poised above his head. That idiot Severus was only supposed to give that parchment to Tom! "It would appear from your attitude that I have already been judged by you and found guilty. Can I assume that Mrs Lestrangle has been asked that question under the influence of truth serum? If so, I would be very interested in what she said."

"I'll bet you would!" Growled Sirius.

Barty could see the panic in the old man's eyes, this was totally unexpected and he thought he'd tied up all the loose ends. Barty intended to give Dumbledore enough rope to hang himself. "Under truth serum both Lestrangle brothers admitted she received the parchment from none other than your boy Severus Snape. He fed them some cock-and-bull story about taking a few medical potions to young Neville. Frank and Alice have confirmed this is a load of shit. Would you care to shed some light on how he got his greasy little hands on what was a very sensitive document? The Lestrangle brothers also claimed that Snape was the one who pointed Voldemort at the Dursleys as a way to draw out the Potters. He'll be facing murder charges for that as well!"

Albus was struggling to keep his composure as the blows kept coming. Barty mentioning Severus's name like that had him seriously worried, he was desperately attempting to talk his way out of this one. He was going to have to reveal some facts he didn't want to and hope that threw them off long enough for him to fix any problems.

"That slip of parchment was safely secured in my private apartment. Bearing in mind that this apartment is in the heaviest warded part of Hogwarts, you'll perhaps forgive me for thinking it was in no danger of finding its way into the hands of death eaters. Unfortunately I trusted Severus with access to my private apartment." Albus didn't actually say why Severus had access to his apartment, he just left

everyone present to draw their own conclusions. "I'm truly sorry for all the harm this caused, my only defence is that he fooled me as well. We can only wait for his trial and I'm sure the truth will show that I'm a victim here to. I would also like to offer my condolences Barty, I can't imagine the pain of losing a son. How's Victoria taking it?"

Barty wanted to kill the old bastard where he stood but believed revenge was a dish best served cold. That didn't mean he couldn't serve some of it out here and now, he even twisted the knife more than a little. "Thank you for your concern Albus, Victoria will be fine. Rest assured though, the tragedy that has befallen my family won't detract me from carrying out my duties to the best of my abilities. Your explanation has been duly noted and I feel confident enough to say that, if the testimony of Severus Snape agrees with your version, there will be no charges forthcoming for you from this incident. He regained consciousness this morning and we plan to question him later on tonight and put him on public trial tomorrow. After all, that's what I promised Lord Potter and the public would happen. I hate letting people down."

Albus was certain this was a bluff until Barty blew that notion right out the water. "Security at the ministry has never been tighter since someone sneaked in and murdered Rodolphus LeStrange in his cell last night. We'd already questioned him and he would surely have spent the rest of his life in Azkaban so they'll be no tears shed over him. We have quite a few prisoners there though that we wouldn't want to lose, especially before we got to question them, so all access to that area has been heavily restricted to aurors only for the next few days at least. I expect I'll be seeing you soon, you won't want to miss your boy's trial?"

No one inside the office could miss the change that came over its current headmaster at those words, Albus sat in his seat without saying a word as the group made its way down the spiral staircase.

They hit bottom and Augusta Longbottom grabbed Barty by the arm. "I didn't believe a word that old bastard said in there. Tell me you've still got Snape and weren't just running a bluff?"

"Madam Longbottom, I can assure you we've still got Severus Snape. If Dumbledore is as guilty as we all suspect, he's going down! I'm almost certain it was him that paid a visit to the ministry



last night and Rodolphus was not the intended target. He's clearly terrified about what his boy is going to spill when we pump him full of veritaserum, I'm going straight back to the ministry to do that very thing."

McGonagall was shocked at what she was hearing, Albus trying to murder people, surely not? Something else struck her. "Barty, you said you were going to question Severus later on tonight?"

"Ah Minerva, there I was bluffing. Albus will still be sitting there trying to figure out how he's going to save the situation when I come back with a squad of Aurors."

This was the kind of language Augusta Longbottom liked to hear. "If Dumbledore was in any way responsible for the attack on my family, I want him to pay. That won't be easy but I guarantee you'll have our support. I was truly sorry to hear about young Barty but you and Victoria mustn't blame yourselves. We all do our best with our children but in the end we have to let them make their own choices. He chose poorly but at the final moment had the courage and conviction to atone for his mistake. In the end, you both had a son to be proud of."

Barty was choked with conflicting emotions at Augusta's words the sentiment behind them. "Thank you Augusta, I'll pass your kind words onto Victoria. I'm sure she'll take comfort from them."

Minerva was busy talking to her three former students, trying to discover just how bad things were. By the sound of things they had gotten rid of one dark lord but were still no further forward. The more she heard about what they suspected Albus had been up to, the more she was realising she didn't really know the man.

The man in question was currently sitting in his office with all his schemes lying in tatters. Under truth serum, Severus would reveal all his plans and the wizarding community would regard him as a monster. No one would consider that, had his plan worked, they would all have been dancing in the streets for days. They had been at war and he had been the only one with any ideas to end it in their favour, ideas that actually led to the demise of the dark lord they all feared so much.

The ancient sacrificial charm he'd pointed Lily Potter toward had been responsible for the demise of the dark lord in the end, even though the wizarding world would never acknowledge that. Albus was almost certain Voldemort would return, he himself would have to disappear until that time. Only then would the wizarding world begin to see that Albus was right and he would be welcomed back to deal with Tom. The problem with that was he no longer would have a weapon to point at Voldemort and his spy would be gone too.

A muggle child would be nothing more than bait though he should be able to rekindle Tom's interest in the Potters and Longbottoms. Riddle's foolish pride wouldn't accept the failure that those people being still alive represented. Albus took a last look around his office and hoped Tom didn't take too long to make his return.

At least with him leaving, the Potters and Longbottoms would now send their boys to Hogwarts. Albus knew more ways in and out the castle than the so called Marauders ever discovered, he would be able to keep a close eye on the boys without being discovered. He started packing those things he simply couldn't do without. It was with a touch of surprise that Albus reckoned the only person ruthless enough to understand what he attempted was the one man determined to see him fall, there would be no mercy coming in his direction from Barty Crouch. Albus Dumbledore was going to have to disappear - for now!

-oOoOo-

Alice portkeyed into the Granger home and was drawn as if by a magnet to the sound of children's laughter. There she found her son and godson playing with two other children, the tears sprang to her eyes at thoughts of what could have happened to both of them ran rampant through her mind. Neville noticed his mum, dad and gran standing there and shot over as fast as his little legs would carry him, he was soon engulfed in a hug by his parents as a clearly emotional Augusta spoke. "Lord Potter, the house of Longbottom owes everyone who was there last night a debt of gratitude it could never repay."

James put a stop to those thoughts immediately. "Madam Longbottom, no debt can exist between friends. If the situations had been reversed, Frank and Alice would have done exactly the same as we did. We're just all delighted we got there in time to be of

assistance, never forget the Longbottoms took down two of the death eaters in that room. We seem to be specialising in lucky escapes recently."

Neville was now busily introducing his new friends to his family as Emma was just about to get the kids lunches ready. She offered the adults a cup of tea and Lily went with her into the kitchen to lend a hand. They were working well together when Alice entered. "Hello again Emma, our first introduction was in rather trying circumstances. Your daughter is such an adorable little girl, she already has those three boys dancing to her tune."

This got a chuckle from Lily, "You don't know the half of it Alice, Hermione probably saved all our lives. She's also going to be a very powerful witch when she gets older."

Alice put her arm around her best friend, "How are you really doing Lily? I assume it was your charm that got rid of that monster?"

Lily could only nod, the power of speech temporarily blocked off by the strong emotions coursing through her. She didn't want to turn into some crying female, she had fought by her husband's side on more than one occasion. The dam finally broke though as Lily now had fat tears streaming down her cheeks. "Yes it was me and it's eating me up Alice. My sister is lying dead and I can't shake the feeling I set her up so my son could live. What kind of person does that make me?"

Alice could see her friend really needed to let this out. "It makes you a mother! While that psycho bitch was torturing me all I could focus on was protecting Neville, you summoning him to safety gave me the strength to put the crazy bastard down. If I had died saving my Neville then I could have crossed over content, knowing you would raise him as your own. You wouldn't have hesitated to do the same for Harry!"

This got another nod from Lily as Alice continued, "Dumbledore put us in this position with that blasted prophecy, it's beginning to look as if he engineered the full thing. We took him at his word and that's beginning to appear like a really bad mistake."

Emma's arm now snaked its way around Lily as she tried to offer her perspective on the situation. "Lily, you have to believe Alice on this

or it will eat you away into nothing. I would step in front of a bullet to save my Hermione, if I also knew she would be well taken care of I would think that was a fair exchange."

Lily was really breaking her heart now. "Her funeral is tomorrow and we can't go in case death eaters show up."

Alice had some better news for her best friend. "I think it will be safe for you to go. The Lestrage brothers were pumped full of veritaserum with every death eater they named being arrested, the rest will face the same treatment."

This brought a gasp of disbelief from Lily that Alice understood, she tried to provide an answer. "Barty appears determined to end this war, he also has Dumbledore in his sights. All our children will be able to grow up in safety and not know what a dark mark is, I would have given my life for that outcome!"

Emma tried to get through to her young friend. "Lily, what you have here is survivors guilt, I think you need to go to that funeral tomorrow and make peace with your sister. I'll take care of the boys until you get back, Neville is welcome to stay here as well if you want to accompany her Alice?"

Alice nodded in agreement, she'd never met Petunia but would be there to support Lily.

Lily actually felt better for getting that out in the open, she would go to the funeral tomorrow and say goodbye to her big sister. Emma almost drew a smile with her next quip.

"Now if we don't get this food out there soon, we could have a riot on our hands. Dudley doesn't like to be kept waiting on his grub!"

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Draco was currently eating the lunch that Kreacher had placed in front of him, the toddler was ignoring the old lady who was busy walking up and down while talking to herself. Walburga Black was in full rant mode.

"Conniving, back-stabbing goblin bastards! How dare they treat me like that! A kept woman on an allowance, paid by that useless

mongrel of a former son. I'll never live down the shame. Listen well Draco, these are the people who are stealing what's rightfully yours right out from under our noses. The Malfoy fortune will be gobbled up by a greedy ministry while the Black one is in the possession of the worst type of wizarding kind. People who betray their birthright and their bloodlines, betray the very woman who gave birth to him."

Creature instantly handed her a glass of ice water, sensing that his beloved mistress needed it. She took a few sips before continuing. "Even having the mongrel put down won't help, that blasted goblin couldn't hide his gloating when he said that would invoke Lord Black's will. The snigger on the evil little shit's thing it calls a face could only mean there was someone other than you named to take over as head of our house. It can only be the Potter brat, Cissi told me they had the nerve to name him godfather to the whelp. We are going to have to be smart about this son, you will inherit and one day return the wizarding world to the old ways. When the dark lord returns, I will have you prepared to take your rightful place at his side."

Walburga had gotten it off her chest and now sat down to lunch, she wasn't quite finished though. "Kreacher, we're going to have to make some household savings so young master Draco here can have everything a young pureblood prince deserves. I refuse to lower myself to ask for a larger allowance, I also don't want anyone to discover Draco is staying here until he's older."

The faithful little elf couldn't hide the adulation in his large eyes. "Yes mistress. It shall be done."

-oOoOo-

Marge Dursley was all set to ambush this mysterious sister of Petunia's at the funeral. She didn't believe for one minute she was a lady and married to a lord, Petunia would have made sure the whole world knew about that! Marge was really hit hard by the deaths, how was she supposed to manage without Vernon looking out for her? The idea that all the cash from the insurance and sale of anything worthwhile would be placed in a trust fund for her nephew was ludicrous, where was her share? She was prepared to have it out with them today, face to face without these blasted lawyers tying her in knots with their big words. What she wasn't prepared for was the beautiful young redhead that turned up with an entourage.

Lily had James on one side of her and Alice on the other as she made her way down the centre of the funeral parlor, her target was the smaller of the two coffins sitting waiting at the front. Frank, Remus and Sirius followed on behind while constantly scanning their surroundings in a manner that would certainly dissuade anyone from approaching or interrupting Lily in any way.

The crying young woman placed her hand on the lid of her sister's coffin. "Thank you Petunia, your courage saved both our boys. I swear I will care for Dudley as if he was my own son. He will grow up loved and knowing what a brave woman his mother really was, you saved us all!"

Lily broke down at this and had to be helped back to a seat, she buried her head in her husband's chest and her tears gradually soaked through his shirt. She didn't hear one word of the sermon that followed, happier memories of her and Petunia growing up running through her mind. Her big sister had looked out for her when she was younger and now Lily would repay her by ensuring her son was loved as he grew up with his new family. It was only when the coffins were being removed that Lily snapped back to reality, she looked into her worried husband's eyes. "Take me home love, I couldn't face the cemetery."

When it was only the six of them remaining, they group portkeyed straight back to the Grangers. Lily found herself sitting on a sofa where all four children appeared to take turns at hugging her, Lily felt as if she needed all the hugs she could get.

Marge Dursley was still waiting outside the funeral parlor, knowing this was the only way in or out. Marge Dursley was prepared to wait all day if necessary but she would be having a long talk with this Lily character!

A/N Thanks for reading

## Chapter 6

Severus Snape was mightily relieved to be alive, disappointed that his present accommodation was a cell but figured that was merely a temporary situation. He clearly remembered the demise of the dark lord and was sure Dumbledore would soon be coming for him. When the cell door opened to admit Barty Crouch Senior, he still wasn't too worried. Severus thought he had protection. With Bart's first few sentences, that thought would be exposed as nothing more than wishful thinking.

"Mr Snape, there is a part of me that's glad to see you still alive. I have to confess though, a larger part wishes your boss Dumbledore had been successful. He actually broke in here last night, only to kill the wrong death eater. You see, I'm assuming that it was you who told Dumbledore that my late son was one of Voldemort's followers?"

Severus was now thinking things must have changed quite a bit while he'd been unconscious and recovering. That Barty Jr. also appeared to be dead did not bode well for his own health. Barty's next words not only confirmed this, they terrified the young potions professor.

"Please don't think I'm attempting to trick you into revealing secrets, you have a date with veritaserum already arranged for later on today. Voldemort is gone and we're rounding up all his death eaters but I'm greedy, I want that bastard Dumbledore as well and I know you can give him to me."

Barty gave that a few seconds to sink in before continuing. "We both know the serum will prevent you telling lies but it also won't have you volunteering information. That means we have to ask all the right questions, which can take time. You're facing two charges of murder and the attempted murder of a child. The Lestranges have also identified you as providing the location of the Longbottoms. Dumbledore really must be terrified of what you know because he broke in here last night and killed Rodolphus Lestrangle by mistake. Funny that, I thought he would have at least recognised you lying in bed."

Severus was now sweating, this was as bad as it could get. Without Dumbledore's protection he was as good as dead. That the old

bastard now appeared determined to kill him to left Severus with nowhere to go. Worse still, Barty clearly knew it!

"We've already got enough on you to ensure your next kiss is from a dementor, help me take down Dumbledore and we can reduce that to room and board at Azkaban. That might not sound like much of a deal but it's the only one on offer. This is also a onetime offer, once I leave this room it's gone. We'll just keep pumping veritaserum into you until we eventually get all the information we want. Unfortunately, that leaves Dumbledore with more than enough time to either get to you and shut you up permanently or disappear out of the country. This is the only reason I'm making this offer as I'd rather see every death eater kissed and put a permanent end to this war. Oh, did I forget to mention, Dumbledore claims you stole the Longbottoms location from his bedroom."

Snape's head was spinning from all this information and Barty was only giving him minutes to make a decision. That Voldemort was gone he'd seen with his own eyes, if the ministry already had the Lestranges then clearly his only value was being used against Dumbledore. He had to ask himself one question, would Albus try to kill him before he could reveal what the old man was actually up to? The answer he came back with was a definite yes. It was time to talk!

"Albus Dumbledore personally handed me that piece of parchment with the Longbottoms address on it. His specific orders were to give it to the dark lord. Bellatrix took it from me to give to her master but the dark lord was too fixated on the Potters to care. He went after Lily Potter's sister and dragged me along."

Both were aware these facts would be confirmed later using veritaserum so Barty accepted this as the truth. Now, what he really wanted was the why.

He listened as Snape explained about overhearing the prophecy and passing that information to the dark lord, and Voldemort believing every word of it! Snape then went to Albus for help but was instead made to spy for the headmaster as Dumbledore set about using the prophecy to engineer Voldemort's downfall. Dumbledore also intended that the parents should die, leaving him to control any surviving child as a weapon against the return of Voldemort.



Barty thought back to Lily Potter's actions the night Dumbledore suggested he take her nephew for a check-up, at the time he thought her punching out Dumbledore was excessive. He now wondered how much of this the Potters had pieced together for themselves? Sharing this information with them would certainly help keep the Potters and the Longbottoms in his camp, catching Dumbledore and seeing him in Azkaban would surely seal the deal.

Barty could appreciate the ingenuity in Dumbledore's scheme but the ruthlessness needed to pull it off left him cold. The supposed leader of the light had stepped heavily into the shadows when he was manipulating innocent families with babies to their deaths. Barty was desperate to win the war and had no compunction about killing to achieve that aim. There was a big difference though in killing an animal that chose to become a death eater against deliberately and deceitfully sacrificing women and children in the hope you might succeed.

Barty gathered six aurors before leaving for Hogwarts to arrest the Chief Warlock, he already had more than enough evidence to at least administer veritaserum to Dumbledore. That Albus firstly pointed Voldemort in the direction of two old pureblood families before making sure he could then find them should be enough to see the old manipulator enjoying Azkaban fare instead of Hogwarts feasts this Christmas.

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Albus was currently sitting in a comfortable chair in his but n ben that nestled deep in the countryside outside the little highland village of Glengarry. He'd bought it some years ago from a widowed crofter who was finding that particular style of life a bit too demanding as he got older. The entire transaction was handled in the muggle world with no paper trail to connect the registered owner, one Dick Harris with Albus Dumbledore. Albus may be considerably older than the muggle from whom he bought the property but had no intention of living a hard life here. His personal elf Kitty was staying at Hogwarts, popping over with his meals and all the latest gossip on what was happening inside the castle. No one would notice her there and, unless asked the question directly, the other elves would say nothing.

Albus had the wizarding wireless to keep him apprised of what was happening in the rest of Britain. His days would be divided between listening to the wireless, researching through his shrunken library and beginning his memoirs. With his triumphal return to the wizarding world, Albus was assured an instant best seller that would financially compensate the aging wizard for his years in forced seclusion. He was certain his stay in the tiny house would be secluded, Albus had enough charms, spells and ruins over the area to hide the place from Merlin himself.

He would need to pay particular attention for the first sign of Voldemort's return. Only by defeating the resurrected dark lord would the British magical public forgive him for the things he plotted to take Voldemort down in the first place. His triumphal return was, at best a couple of years away so he might as well make himself as comfortable here as possible.

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Barty had missed Dumbledore at Hogwarts but was managing to hold that information from the press for now. He wanted to let the effected families know before they read the Prophet's version of events. It wasn't too difficult since all the arrests kept the paper busy speculating where it would all end. With no access to the Potters, Barty was relying on the Longbottoms to pass the information on.

He was now aware Lily Potter must have cast some obscure charm on her nephew, which would allow her sister's death to protect the boy. It was also obvious from speaking with the Longbottoms that they were aware of this as well, Barty was keen to allay any fears they had about resulting investigations. "I see no reason why any of this should become public knowledge. The official reason on how Voldemort met his end is that he died while performing some dark ritual. This works for me and the rest of the magical world, why change it? Severus Snape's trial may be public but we can ensure certain things don't get mentioned. This also goes no further, Snape was more than helpful with our efforts to bring Dumbledore to justice, his aim was to avoid a dementor's kiss. He will definitely be going to Azkaban, only the duration of his stay is to be set by his trial. I honestly think Dumbledore played Snape as much as he did everybody else and the ex-potions professor will be locked away for many years."

Frank and Alice were both aurors and knew how the system worked, they had no problem with seeing Snape as a bit player and would support Barty in this matter. All their rage was directed at Dumbledore, their illustrious leader who smiled at you while working tirelessly behind the scenes to engineer your murder. It was the callous way the whole thing was supposed to play out that really shocked the Longbottoms. Frank reckoned his mother would have been next on Dumbledore's hit list, there was no way she would have allowed the old goat to interfere with Neville's upbringing if the worst happened to them.

Alice understood that Lily had pieced most of this together already but to hear it all laid out like that made her feel sick. Someone they trusted with their lives had betrayed them in the worst possible way. Planning their deaths and taking control of their orphaned children, what a sick bastard! If Voldemort had murdered Lily and James before meeting his end at Godric's Hollow, Alice had to wonder what the old man had in store for her and Sirius. As Harry's godparents, neither of them would have voluntarily relinquished control of the boy. Sirius would have played a major part in Harry's life while Frank and Alice raised him alongside Neville, Dumbledore couldn't allow that to happen for his plans to work. The old wizard would need to be caught and questioned under veritaserum before they would have the answers they needed.

No one there had any trouble believing that Dumbledore had a ready prepared bolthole waiting on him, he would be too proud to skip the country like a common criminal. They were now forced into the situation where they were waiting on him making a mistake before he could be punished for his crimes.

This was all Lily needed to hear just after burying her sister.

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They were currently standing outside the oddest house Emma had ever laid eyes on. She wasn't sure what to expect from a house called the rookery, some country home with birds roosting under the overhanging eaves? What she was faced with was a massive white chess piece. Emma couldn't help but imagine a giant hand picking up the entire house and moving it to the next hillside as part of a game. She was walking up the garden path when a pretty young

blond woman rushed passed her to engulf Lily and the now struggling Harry in a hug.

"Oh Lily, it's so good to see you again. I cried all day after seeing that picture of your house destroyed on the front page of the Prophet. It was blown to pieces, how did you survive it?"

Emma introduced Maia to Dan and Emma before indicating the little girl holding her daddy's hand. "This angel here is Hermione and she's the reason we're all alive. She invited Harry and me to tea, otherwise we would have been home when that monster broke down our door. Hermione is definitely a witch though her parents are non-magical."

Maia herded them into the house to introduce them to her family, Her husband Xeno was sitting on the floor playing along with their little girl. Xeno appeared few years older than his wife but you hardly noticed that, his outlandish clothes demanded all your attention. His current apparel may have missed out on one of the colours of the rainbow but it would be impossible to pick out which one in the maelstrom of colours that assaulted your eyes. The little blond girl, sitting on the floor beside her father playing with her building blocks, was almost lost in the kaleidoscope affect her father appeared to be trying to achieve. She wore a lovely yellow flower print dress and her smile when Lily spoke to the girl outshone her garishly dressed father.

"Hello Luna. My, you're getting such a big girl! This is Harry, that's Dudley and..."

A certain Miss Granger interrupted Emma, she was a big girl and didn't need anyone else to introduce her. "Hello Luna, My name is Hermione Jane Granger. I'm so pleased to meet you." She kissed the girl on the cheek and was soon joined by Harry who'd squirmed out of his mother's arms, desperate to be down beside his best friend. He copied Hermione as best he could, seeming pleased that this was a name he could pronounce properly. "Me Harry, Luna." Still copying Hermione, he kissed the little girl on the cheek. This had all three toddlers giggling and laughing while the adults thought it was one of the cutest things they'd ever seen. Dudley appeared too busy staring at everything in this strange place.

The four kids were soon playing happily together, allowing the adults time to chat. Lily couldn't wait for news of their missing friend. "Maia, where's Mary? Please tell me they're all ok?"

Maia hated to be the one to give bad news but had to on this occasion. "She and John took baby Mary up to Manchester to live with his aunt just after you and Alice went into hiding. With both of them being muggle borns, they reckoned the death eaters would be looking for them. The final straw for them was when Mary's parents house was attacked and burned to the ground. I got a letter from her saying they could no longer bring their daughter up in Britain, it just wasn't safe! They applied as muggles to emigrate to Australia, their ship sailed from Southampton three weeks ago. That's all I know, everyone is terrified to give information about their whereabouts. Perhaps if they read about what happened, she may contact me again from Australia. We can't really blame her if she doesn't."

Lily reluctantly agreed. "If Voldemort was still alive, the Potters would be heading to that part of the world ourselves. As it is, we'll be staying in a muggle neighbourhood from now on. It was only being in a muggle house that saved us that night and having Dudley now living with us made our minds up."

Dan had expressed interest after hearing that Xeno owned and published a newspaper, both then disappeared through to see his magical printing press.

Lily and Maia were catching up while Emma was surreptitiously watching James, who was quietly keeping a close eye on the children. All four toddlers were playing along quite happily, this appeared to please James a lot more than Emma thought it should. She then remembered James had been worried that Harry and Hermione would be so wrapped up with each other, they wouldn't interact with other children.

That clearly was not the case as they had played happily with Dudley and Neville, now it looked as if Luna was being added to that list. The little girl appeared slightly overwhelmed at first with all the company in her house, she could see her mother sitting close by though. It didn't take long for Luna to become involved with the game Hermione had come up with. She and Harry piled up high the blocks with the strange animal pictures on them so Dudley and Luna could knock them over. Emma couldn't help but think that before

Halloween, Hermione would never have played a game like this with younger children. Meeting Harry had been very good for her precocious daughter. As this group grew up together, her extra months of age would stand out less and less.

She wholeheartedly agreed with the opinion she overheard James expressing, that the children should be allowed to grow up as normally as possible. Emma was prepared to let things go as they were for now. First sign of any strangeness and she would be demanding answers over this bond thing. Little did Emma know that time was closer than she thought.

On first sight, Xeno's printing press wouldn't have looked out of place as an exhibit in a museum. As he was discovering more and more with the magical world though, things were not always what they seemed. When his host demonstrated how it worked, it was ahead of any muggle printing press available at the moment. Computers were beginning to make an introduction into some of the larger and richer newspapers but Dan could see the future in the way Xeno laid out his pages. He may use parchment and a quill to write his articles but when he then used his wand, everything changed. The data was transferred from the parchment to the magical printing press where it was converted to the font Xeno stipulated. He could then add a graphic and have the text wrap around it and build his publication a page at a time.

Dan may not understand a lot of the stuff published in the Quibbler but in layout, it reminded him of a magazine from the thirties or forties. He promised to pick up some magazines to let him see the latest in muggle thinking on layouts and advertising, this had Xeno very interested.

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Sirius left Gringotts with a smile on his face, it was hard not to smile when you were greeted with the sight of Diagon Alley once more bustling with witches and wizards going about their everyday business. Both he and James were still on leave from their auror duties as they struggled to decide what they wanted to do with their lives, now that the war was effectively over. Barty had rounded up every death eater named in the on-going interrogations, the resulting trials were proceeding at a fast pace.

Snape's trial was tomorrow and then the whole country would discover just how big a bastard one Albus 'too bloody many middle names to remember' Dumbledore actually was. Both he and James had plenty of other offers of work but would probably wait until after Christmas before making any life-changing decisions. Neither was required to work for monetary reasons so there was no rush.

He would need to find a new flat, Sirius Black was not going back to the flea-pit of a hideaway he'd been laying low in. There would always be a room for him and Remus at the Potters but he also wanted his own place, with enough room for Remus too!

The goblins had just informed him that his mother had now discovered who was the current head of the Black Family. He actually pitied the poor goblin who was left to give her that bad news. He would continue to financially provide for her and ensure she had a roof over her head but that was all, Sirius wanted nothing more to do with his mother. When she passed away, he intended to sell Grimmaud Place and everything inside it. Preferably without ever having to set foot in that monstrosity of a house ever again. Perhaps, by then, house prices might be back up, there was rather a glut in the market at the moment with death eater mansions being sold off as part of their punishment.

Sirius was intending to buy some presents today, to celebrate that they all came through this war in one piece and just for the sheer hell of it. He originally wanted to buy his godson a toy broom to replace the one that was lost when Voldemort destroyed their cottage. That idea had been quickly vetoed by James, he didn't want Harry zooming about the house while Dudley was able only to sit and watch. Both Potter parents had no intention of hiding the differences between the boys, they just wanted to wait until they were old enough to understand those differences.

Sirius had to respect their reasoning and, when he spotted the little brightly coloured tricycles in the toyshop, was able to live with that decision. One of these would also give Dudley a much-needed opportunity to begin burning off some of his excess weight. Sirius dreaded to think what size the boy would have become if Petunia had raised him. Another few things caught his eye as 'uncle Paddy' enjoyed being a big kid in the toy store. Better still, he was a big kid with gold to spend on little kids who would appreciate the gifts.

-oOoOo-

Peter White was having a super day that he didn't think could get any better, he felt he could leap tall buildings with a single bound. The death eater trials had Prophet sales soaring and today, Severus Snape served up the esteemed Albus Dumbledore as their new main course for tomorrow's edition. There would be a feeding frenzy as their readers devoured every detail of Dumbledore's dramatic fall from grace with their breakfast. The Wizengamot were waiting to hear all the cases before passing sentence, their guilt was no longer an issue since they had confessed to their crimes under the influence of veritaserum. The Prophet's campaign to strip them of their wealth in order to provide protection for everyone else had gathered so much momentum that it looked certain to become law. If not, their current government better be able to supply them with a very good reason or they wouldn't be the government for too much longer. It probably was this grand mood that encouraged two of his junior reporters to bravely risk entering his office.

"Mr White sir, we have something we think you might be interested in."

Peter couldn't even remember the names of the young man and woman who were now trembling in front of him, he bade them to sit down as he decided to listen and give them the benefit of his experience. The young man bravely soldiered on while the girl appeared ready to flee if Peter so much as raised his voice.

"With all the death eaters being arrested and the resulting trials, we were allocated the job of researching Voldemort's origins. We think we may have found him and it could be very big. Our research focused on Hogwarts, Slytherin actually. We researched all the wizards in a fifteen year period that is generally considered to correspond with his supposed age. We were looking for someone who disappeared without trace and came up with a few names. My partner here loves muggle word puzzles and is always scribbling in the corners of her parchment, she came up with this!"

Peter was then handed a piece of parchment that had Tom Marvolo Riddle and I am Lord Voldemort written on it, his eyebrows shot up immediately as the implications hit home. "Are you trying to tell me that Wizarding Britain has been shitting itself for years, terrified to



say a bloody anagram? I assume you have more information on this Tom character, otherwise I'm going to become most upset!"

He glanced at his partner before answering. "He was an orphan although that's not quite true. His mother was a witch who died giving birth to him in an orphanage he never left until he went to Hogwarts, the father listed on his birth certificate was a muggle. His mother's brother then wiped out the father and both his parents when the boy was in his sixth year at Hogwarts. The mother's family were old purebloods, dirt poor though and not very bright. Both her brother and their father died in Azkaban."

Peter felt the hairs on the back of his neck stand up. "This would make the feared Lord Voldemort a half blood bastard! Also, if I heard you right, anyone who could object or sue over this story is already dead?"

Both young reporters nodded enthusiastically.

Peter had intended to give them the benefit of his experience, that time had now come. "Ok, we have the bones here of a great story. What we need to do now is put some flesh on it to make a sensational story. His mother was innocent, taken advantage of by an unscrupulous muggle! No, scrap that. We don't want to create any sympathy for this bastard."

Both young reporters watched in awe as their editor stitched the story together in his head. "His mother was plain, piss-poor and desperate for a better life than the one she saw in front of her. She used a love potion on the handsome young muggle and they ran away together, love's young dream! She became so enamoured with her new life, the delusional young girl convinced herself that her new life was real and forever, she stopped giving him the potion. He was out of there quicker than a rat escaping down a sewer, unknowing that she was now carrying his child."

The two young reporters were scribbling this down like mad when the girl stopped, gathered her courage and made a suggestion. "Mr White sir, do you think the young Voldemort could have killed his father and grandparents, then framed his uncle for the murders? The two families lived quite close to one another."

Peter was impressed. "Wow, that's really stretching things. I love it! You could really go places with an imagination like that, but you will have to develop a personality and attitude to match. There is no such creature as a successful shy reporter. What's your name?"

"It's Rita sir."

"Well Rita, I'll give you and this young man first crack at this. We're leading tomorrow with Dumbledore's downfall, the next day will be full of the follow-up to those revelations. After tearing down one icon, on Saturday we're going to destroy the legend of Voldemort. By the time we're finished with him, if he dares to return, the public will throw rotten fruit at the dark lord. Get me official documents, all the records you can and there must be pictures out there somewhere. He may be already dead but the Prophet is going to be remembered as the publication that killed him off for good!"

-oOoOo-

Barty was confirmed as a certainty to be the next minister of magic, he'd stood unopposed and would now be sworn in the day after Millicent retired. While this was his goal, Barty was also seething inside. The Prophet had been a tremendous help in getting him into the minister's office but their expose of Voldemort had consequences none of them could have foreseen. The Wizengamot had seized on this like a drowning man would grab a straw, they now portrayed the whole death eater debacle as purebloods being led astray by a demented half blood with delusions of grandeur. The Prophets campaign against the death eaters couldn't be ignored though, not without public rioting on the steps of the ministry.

That distinguished body of pureblood witches and wizards came up with a blanket sentence that covered everyone. Death eaters were to be 'taxed' eighty percent of their wealth and made spend the next ten years in Azkaban.

Most witches and wizards would concede that this was a just punishment, Barty Crouch wasn't most witches and wizards. He'd lost a son and wanted them to pay with their lives. He consoled himself with the thought that a lot could happen in ten years, especially with him as minister. They certainly wouldn't be having an easy time of it in Azkaban and Barty intended to offer the goblins incentives to ensure they found all of their now 'taxable' wealth.

For the moment, he would smile and accept the decision. Barty would spend as much time with his wife as his new job allowed while putting his thirst for revenge at simmer. The death eaters would still be there when Barty got around to them, Victoria didn't have anything like ten years left to live. If he was honest, she probably didn't have ten months. He resolved to make Victoria his top priority as Barty tried to make the time she had left the best that he could.

-oOoOo-

Emma had never seen a house decorated and outfitted in such a short space of time, then again she'd never seen it done using magic before. Lily and James had even fixed a beautiful room for Hermione right next to Harry's. They hadn't reached the end of November yet the Potters were ready to spend their first night in their new home. The paperwork had passed really quickly and then everyone had pitched in. Maia and Xeno had even turned up though Emma tried not to laugh at the way Lily monitored any decorating Xeno did. The man seemed incapable of thinking in any less than six colours when dressing but that wasn't the worst of it, none of them matched in the slightest!

Emma thought it would feel strange having their house to themselves again but Hermione wouldn't have to go too far to find her best friend. The kids were currently in their new playroom, filled with toys that Sirius had bought. Emma thought it was time to make a move. "Well, we should be getting home and allow you to settle into your new home. Hermione, say goodnight to Harry and Dudley!"

It was instantly noticeable that Harry and Hermione froze at those words. Both looked toward the adults with expressions of fear on their little faces, the tears quickly followed.

Dan misread the situation and actually chuckled. "Hermione, we have to go home princess. You can see Harry and Dudley tomorrow, they only stay next door to us."

Both toddlers grabbed onto each other and shouted in a pitch that only young children appear able to achieve. It wasn't the pitch that sent shivers down the adult's backs and shattered every piece of

glass in the room. It was the accidental magic released by two powerful and upset toddlers screaming 'NO' in perfect unison.

All four parents responded instantly to the state of distress their children were now in. Hermione could hardly talk for sobbing, only 'not leaving Harry James' was decipherable. Harry was, if anything, in a worse state and just kept repeating 'Hermi' over and over as he desperately clung to her.

Emma was quick on the uptake and offered the children a solution, "Hermione, do you want to stay with Harry tonight in his new house?"

The sheer relief on their little faces was heartbreaking to watch for the parents, heartbreaking in the sense that such a simple thing had gotten both of them into this state in mere seconds. Dan had to carry them both up to Harry's room, they simply refused to let go of each other. Emma followed on behind carrying Paddy, the large cuddly dog was her daughter's favourite thing and went everywhere with her since Sirius bought it for Hermione. Lily followed on with Dudley in her arms as James had his wand out repairing the room.

After putting Dudley down, Lily had to use magic to transfigure the kid's clothes. They wouldn't release one another long enough to get changed. They finally appeared to settle a little when they were tucked up in bed together, the toy Paddy lying across the bottom of the bed where their legs were too short to reach. The three adults stood and watched as the toddlers eventually calmed enough to allow sleep to take hold, Emma knew it was time for some answers.

"Don't you think you should be telling us about this magical bond our children share Lily?"

Dan wasn't sure what was happening here, he was alarmed because his wife's tone was almost accusational.

Lily nodded. "Go on down to the living room, I want to check on Dudley and get a few books for you to read. This isn't a bad thing Emma and not totally responsible for what we witnessed tonight. They haven't been apart since Halloween and we should have considered that. We knew they'd be sleeping apart now we're living in separate houses, it apparently never occurred to our kids."

James already had a bottle of wine open and glasses ready, he was anticipating this discussion and they were just waiting on Lily returning back downstairs.

Lily entered and handed the dentists two thin books. "When James first mentioned the possibility of a magical bond between our children, I naturally wanted to know more. This is all we could find. I'm pretty sure you would react exactly the same as me and hate the thought of our children's magic forcing them into something, I'm pleased to say that's not the case here."

Emma was glancing at the books hungrily but they were for later, Lily had read them so she would listen to her friend first.

"When Petunia and I were growing up, she was fixated on how to find her perfect match. She was forever completing these personality surveys in mother's magazines that were supposed to narrow down what you were looking for. You know the type of rubbish, star sign, loves moonlit walks barefoot on the beach, doesn't fart in bed. All that and she ended up marrying Vernon! A magical bond is really your magic's way of saying you've hit the jackpot, this person is the perfect match for you."

This was all new to Dan so he gulped his wine before voicing his concern at what he was hearing. "Are you saying those two will end up married?"

It was James who answered "That's a possibility Dan, but only a possibility. They will always be friends and close, that's a given. Anything else will be up to them when they're much older, and that's the way I think we should keep it. We try to insure they have a good group of friends while growing up, get involved in any sports or clubs they want and basically lead as normal a life as possible for a young witch and wizard. If, after they've finished school, our son comes to you and asks for your daughter's hand, I can only hope you'll say yes. You will have at least sixteen years to get to know him by then."

This all sounded too good to be true to Emma, "What aren't you telling us James? We want to know, and have a right to know everything."

He let out a sigh, they would probably have pieced this together anyway after reading the books. "Emma, you know I'm a pureblood

by birth, not by choice. An old pureblood would already be talking to Dan about a betrothal contract for your daughter. Finding a bond that strong is very rare and special."

Emma understood something of blood politics now, the Grangers even had the Prophet delivered. "Hermione's a muggle born, surely a pureblood wouldn't offer a betrothal on our daughter?"

James actually smiled, "Emma, the type of pureblood who deals in those contacts only lets his child associate with other pureblood children."

Dan still wasn't satisfied with what he was hearing. "We're getting off the point here. What does that mean for our kids and what happened here tonight?"

Lily offered her take on the matter. "We should have anticipated tonight, Hermione might sound old for her years but she's still only two. We were about to separate her from Harry James, there really was only one way they were going to react. I think it's going to be like trying to wean Dudley off wanting to eat every ten minutes, a slow and careful process. Let them sleep together for now with the odd night thrown in where they sleep in their own rooms in the same house. They may need to be a bit older before they'll accept sleeping in different houses and I think we'll be holidaying together for quite a few years to come. They're fine in the company of other kids but just can't understand why we want to separate them when they're so happy together."

Emma appeared to be getting it now. "That day in the surgery as we waited to see the nurse, Hermione reacted the second she laid eyes on Harry."

Lily was nodding, "Harry went with her in an instant, he's never done that before. Can any of us deny they're much happier together?"

None of them could but something was still bothering Dan. "James, why would purebloods arrange their children's marriage before they were even three years old?"

"With such a strong bond, any children they had as a couple would be not only healthy, they would be as magically powerful as they

could be. To a pureblood, marriage is all about continuation and strengthening of the bloodline."

Emma paled, "Could you please not mention grandchildren just yet, I'm far too young!"

Lily now had tears slowly running down her cheeks. "You've seen that magic can be a wonderful or deadly thing. When I cast that charm on Dudley, I knew my magic would demand a price for saving his life. We finally went to a healer we could trust to have both Dudley and me checked out to discovered that price. Dudley is healthy and normal muggle boy, though a tad overweight and for that we are grateful. The price my magic demanded is to take away my ability to have any more children."

James also had tears threatening to escape from the corner of his eyes at this point as Lily tried to play down the heartache they both felt. "I have a loving husband and two wonderful boys, it's a price I would pay again without hesitation. Dan and Emma, sorry but I'm already counting Hermione as a member of my family. If one day in the future, our kids chose to make that official, I will be one very happy mother."

Dan had experience with this from their own inability to have any more children, he rose and put his arm around Lily's shoulder. "Just as long as you know both the boys are considered part of the Granger family too."

This almost drew a smile from the little redhead. There may be a bond between their children but there was also a bond between both sets of parents. A bond that just got stronger with their shared pain and heartache of not being able to have any more children. Both couples though now considered they had three of a family, they could be happy with that.

Hermione was just two and, apart from that incident earlier tonight, was happier than Dan had ever seen her. He also agreed with James, keep everything as normal as possible and monitor the situation. They would face whatever problems that arose just like they did tonight, by sitting down and talking them out. Emma now had Lily in her arms as James went to fetch something a little bit stronger than the wine they had been drinking. Dan couldn't help but

think his wife's judgement was right that first night they all met, the Potters were good people.

A/N Thanks for reading.



## Chapter 7

A/N as most of you already guessed, there will now be small 'time jumps' in order to get the kids onto the Hogwarts Express. I intend to do this by taking snapshots of important events in the lives of this story's main characters. Each snapshot will be dated to hopefully avoid confusion. This will take a couple of chapters as the story gradually becomes more about the kids and less about their parents.

Friday 24th June 1983 - St James Park, Central London.

James and Lily were watching the three kids as they fed the park's wildlife on their way toward the park café. While Harry, Hermione and Dudley were happily feeding the ducks and trying to entice a few squirrels down from the trees, Lily was speaking quietly with her husband about a subject they'd gone over many times before. "I'm still not convinced this is a good idea, tell me again why we're doing this?"

James was trying to hide the anger he was feeling, especially since that anger wasn't directed at his wife. He was every bit as concerned about this situation as Lily was. "Because this bitch threatened to take us to court for visitation rights. Our lawyers are certain she could never take Dudley away from us but warn she has a good case for visitation. By letting her see Dudley, we should be able to head off her claim that we're denying her access to her only nephew. Personally you know I agree with you, I don't want the bitch anywhere near our family. As Dudley gets older, his opinion will count for more if we ever get taken to a muggle court. We know she's only after him for the insurance money we put in Dudley's trust fund, a judge might decide otherwise."

Lily's anger was also simmering just beneath the surface, "I hate the fact that she's related to Dudley, the very thought of him being raised in that family makes me feel ill."

James sympathised with his wife, "I know love but we have to deal with this. Whether we like it or not, she's Dudley's aunt. That's why we brought the kids to London, I don't want her even knowing where we live."

The couple were interrupted by three giggling children who had come running back over, all scraps having been consumed by the

greedy ducks. Ice cream had been promised and hands were held as the family made its way to the café inside the park.

Everyone voted for sitting outside but they had no sooner sat down with their treat and juice than a strange looking woman joined their company. Marge Dursley was almost as broad as she was tall with multiple chins that would require the fingers of both hands to count. This imposing vision was dressed in a heavy tweed suit that was bursting at the seams to contain her bulk and the sweat stains were clearly visible at the armpits.

Lily couldn't help but think that, even on a beautiful summers day and this idyllic setting, Marge Dursley could blot out the sun. This feat had very little to do with her immense girth, more her dementor like ability to suck all the warmth and any scrap of happiness out of whatever environment she entered.

Marge barely allowed time for polite introductions before going straight onto the offensive. "Why was I not allowed to see my nephew yesterday on his third birthday, not to mention only being allowed to send cards or gifts through those blasted lawyers?"

Lily was quick to answer. "Yesterday, Dudley had all his friends over for his birthday, it was quite hectic. We felt you would prefer time to talk to your nephew and that wouldn't have been possible yesterday. I don't think Dudley sat down for more than two minutes all day. With the good weather, they were all outside in the garden playing games."

Marge then addressed the boy directly, "Hello Dudley, I'm your aunt Marge. You might not remember me, it's been so long since I was last allowed to see you."

Dudley nodded his head in understanding, all three children had been told to be on their best behaviour today. "Yes, I remember you aunt Marge. Mum and dad told me all about you. Thank you for the cards and presents you've sent me."

The large woman was incensed. "They are not your mum and dad, your father was my brother."

James swiftly intervened. "Dudley is well aware that Lily and I are not his parents. He asked if he could call us mum and dad, were we supposed to say no?"

Lily was aware her husband was on a short fuse today, she tried to calm the waters. "The kids have a friend Susan who also lost her parents, she only has an aunt to look after her. Dudley wanted a mum and dad, you can be sure he will know all about his mother from me."

Marge though was just getting into her stride and wasn't for being so easily deflected from a confrontation. "You wanted me to have time with Dudley yet brought two other kids along? Just how are you going to tell him about his mother? I never heard Petunia mention her sister."

Lily was determined to keep her cool. "Petunia and I kind of drifted our separate ways for a few years, we were moving in different circles. Our two boys though are more like brothers than cousins and Hermione goes everywhere with them. They've been inseparable for nearly two years now and, as Hermione lives next door, they're always together."

Marge had her own interpretation of 'different circles'. "So you really are a Lady, married to a Lord? No wonder my bloody useless lawyers keep getting blocked. I can't believe Petunia never told me that little detail, she never was one who could keep juicy gossip to herself."

All pretence at patience left the petite redhead, she was not about to let this bitch insult the memory of her sister. "My sister was a lot deeper than most people gave her credit for, there was more to Petunia Evans Dursley than you ever thought possible."

It wasn't that James didn't want to see Lily curse this woman into next week, it just wouldn't fit in with what they were trying to achieve here today. He interrupted before any magic was used. "Excuse me Miss Dursley, I was under the impression that you were here today to visit with your nephew. Perhaps you should try doing that, instead of interrogating us."

Marge so wanted to snap right back at this turd but her lawyers had warned her, losing her temper would be the worst thing she could do.

To stand any chance of gaining custody of her nephew, and her brother's money, she would have to appear a good parent. She noticed the three children all staring at her and couldn't help but concede they were immaculately dressed in expensive yet casual clothes. Marge also thought her nephew was far too skinny, she'd soon fatten him up to a more normal size.

Marge now attempted a charm offensive on the kids. Unfortunately, to a three year old child, it made her appear even scarier. "Well my little nephew poo, how do you like living with the Potters?"

No one present could fail to see Dudley's entire face light up with pleasure at that question. "Oh I love it, our home is pure magic! We get to see all our friends nearly every day. Aunt Emma and Uncle Dan are always around too. Remus and Sirius are loads of fun, we have a great time."

Marge was floundering with the sincerity in that answer, she couldn't see any judge taking a child away from a place like that. She was just about to ask who these relatives were when the little girl spoke, very politely too.

"Emma and Dan are my parents, as Aunt Lily said we live right next door. Our parents joined the two gardens together and gave us a massive play area out back, all our friends love it too."

She could see this was going to be a hard sell so Marge pulled out her big guns, all children loved animals. "Do you like dogs Dudley? I have my own kennels on my property and breed bulldogs."

Dudley's eyes also lit up at this subject. "Oh we all love dogs. We've got Paddy, he's magic too!"

This positive response to dogs was the first thing that had gone right for Marge so far, she pushed ahead. "That's wonderful, what breed of dog is Paddy?"

James jumped in, terrified the kids would say any more. "Paddy isn't what you would call any specific breed of dog, I suppose mongrel describes him best."

Lily was now struggling not to laugh, anticipating explaining this conversation to Sirius later. Marge however, wasn't in the slightest amused.

"All mongrels should be drowned at birth! It's the only way to protect the purity of the breeds. I hope you've at least been responsible and had him neutered?"

Hermione took these remarks to heart. She'd no idea what neutered meant but 'drowned at birth' was self-explanatory. The little girl couldn't contain her outburst. "Paddy is the best dog in the whole wide world! That just shows you know nothing about dogs." The tears started because Aunt Lily and Uncle James had asked them all to be on their best behaviour and she'd let them down. She just couldn't imagine anyone being cruel enough to do that to an animal. Hermione felt an arm go around her and knew without looking it was Harry.

She couldn't see Harry glaring at this strange and rude woman but Dudley could. Dudley was sitting waiting on the fireworks that were sure to be coming since this aunt of his made Hermione cry. Nobody did that to Hermione, not when Harry was there anyway. Then he noticed mum's hand gripping Harry's shoulder, she was also whispering in his ear. Mum may be stopping Harry from doing anything but there were no restrictions on him, there was also no one paying attention as he lifted his juice. This aunt was going to find out that it wasn't just Harry who looked after Hermione, no one was going to make her cry in front of Dudley either. Not without him doing something about it. His juice was still more than half full and a good part of that was crushed ice, he emptied the lot onto his aunt's lap.

"No one makes Hermione cry, you're a bad witch!"

Marge shot up in shock from the freezing liquid and crushed ice that just soaked through her tweed skirt. "Why you little..."

The large woman suddenly had a face full of Lily Potter. "Don't you dare say anything about my boy!"

Marge Dursley gave her a wicked smile, "Ah, but that's the whole crux of the matter, isn't it? He's not your boy! After what I've witnessed here today, I'm confident my lawyers can get me custody

of my nephew. He's obviously receiving no discipline where he is, I won't stand by and watch him become a waster."

That was quite enough for James, he was through pandering to this bitch. The gloves were definitely now off. "Listen to me Miss Dursley, you go right ahead with your lawyers. The more money they take off you, the less chance there is of you ever getting near our Dudley. Your kennel business is already floundering and, as it's also your home, you could find yourself out on the street very shortly. A single woman with no home and no income is never going to be awarded custody of Dudley, not while we draw breath. All Dudley's inheritance is tied up and can't be touched until he's older."

Marge grabbed her handbag with the intention of storming off, she had to leave a parting threat first. "The next time we meet will be in court, I'm looking forward to it. His court appointed legal guardian can undo anything you have set up for Dudley. He's the only link I have left to my brother and I won't give this up."

Dudley was apologetic as she left, "I'm really sorry dad. I know you wanted us to be on our best behaviour but that woman was really horrible. They couldn't force me to leave you and go to live with her, could they?"

James moved beside the now frightened child. "No son, we would never let that happen. Even if the courts were crazy enough to grant her wishes, you've seen what we can do. We would come and get you and she wouldn't even know you were gone. We're trying to do it within the non-magical law so you can all go to school, that doesn't mean we won't break it if they try to take you away from us."

Harry and Hermione appeared at his other side. "Thanks for that Dud, I so wanted to see that woman end up in the lake but mum wouldn't let me. At least she ended up wet."

Dudley smiled at them both. "That's ok Harry, nobody makes Hermione cry and gets away with it. Not while we're here."

This earned Dudley wide smiles and a kiss on the cheek from the young lady in question. James and Lily were getting them ready to move, some more duck feeding and then the tube home. The Potters had been holding their lawyers back because this woman was 'family', threatening to take Dudley away removed that barrier.

They had been having Marge Dursley investigated for the past six months. They knew exactly how many nights she was too drunk to make it up the stairs and slept on the couch. They may want Dudley to keep his father's name, that didn't mean they wanted him going anywhere near the last remaining Dursley.

-oOoOo-

Monday 25th August 1985 – Granger Residence, Crawley.

Emma watched on as her daughter zoomed along the track contained in the combined Potter/Granger back gardens. Hermione wore bright red shorts, a multi-coloured top and her long hair pulled back into a pony tail that trailed down her back. The most important thing for Emma though was the wide smile she wore on her face, Hermione couldn't be happier and neither could her mother.

A luminous yellow bicycle with streamers coming out the handle bar grips had superseded Hermione's beloved tricycle. There was also a custom made basket on the front since 'Paddy' liked to ride her bike too. Emma was glad Lily could do cleaning charms. The toy dog still appeared like brand new whereas the constant trips it would have needed into her washing machine over the last four years would have seen poor Paddy falling to bits by now.

As Hermione raced her two best friends around the track, Emma couldn't help but think her daughter was a picture postcard vision of what a happy child should be. It might be a touch more on the tomboy side than Emma was prepared for but then again, both her best friends were boys. The proud mother could easily while away the hours simply watching the children play and practically did so every Monday.

Neville, Luna and Susan were sitting on the swings and climbing frame that the track circled around, shouting encouragement to their friends while awaiting their turn. Each had their own bike, there just wasn't enough room on the track for the six of them to race at the same time. It was still a back garden after all, albeit a massive one!

Susan's aunt had heard about their arrangement early on from Frank and Alice and had asked to join, the kids spent every Thursday at the Bones residence.

Lily appeared with sandwiches, juice and fruit for the hungry tribe, the kids had their own picnic area beside the climbing frame. The track was a later and much welcome addition. Next summer, the 'menfolk' had promised to build the kids a treehouse up in the old oak that sat in the corner of their garden. Emma had been concerned about this until Lily explained some of the safety charms she would be placing around it, falling out the treehouse and onto a cushioning charm didn't seem so bad.

Emma sighed, "I'm really going to miss this time with the kids, I can't believe they're all starting school next week."

Lily was now standing beside her friend, both watching as a bunch of energetic kids demolished the lunch she'd just provided. "I know exactly what you mean Emma, I think all of us mothers feel the same way. Even Amelia, who wasn't expecting to find herself raising a child, has been surprised at how much she has enjoyed the children's company."

"I'm surprised how much the kids are looking forward to starting school, they're all excited and don't appear in the least apprehensive."

Lily agreed but thought she knew why. "I'm certain it's because they'll all be there together and in the same class. The six of them make up nearly a quarter of the class. Both James and I are taking the day off so we can see them attending their first day of school."

Emma planned to be there too, it was slightly easier when you were your own bosses. "Have you told McGonagall your decision yet?"

It was Lily's turn to sigh, "James owed her the bad news yesterday. Neither of us is ready to teach full time yet, us at Hogwarts a couple of days a week gives Minerva and Filius time to do the administration needed for running the school. Perhaps we'll change our minds when the kids get older, we won't be changing anything for a good few years at least."

Their husbands then joined the two wives, Dan had been closing their practice on a Monday afternoon from the moment their childcare schedule had been finalised. Watching Hermione play with her five friends was something Dan could never get enough of. The Potter and Granger parents had been determined to give their kids



as normal a childhood as possible, Dan couldn't help but think they had done a good job so far.

That the three kids spending alternate nights staying in each other's houses had very quickly just become a way of life for the two families. One night of peace and quiet was followed by children's voices and always laughter. It may not have suited everyone but for them it worked to as near perfection as you were likely to get.

Harry and Hermione mostly slept in their own beds now. If one of them was restless or had a nightmare, the other would inevitably make their way to their best friend and offer comfort. How could a father have a problem with that? Hermione's incidents of accidental magic had practically ceased, she now needed to be really upset before the lights as much as flickered. Long gone were the days when they thought she was going to bring the house down on top of them.

Dudley had become their constant companion and the trio got on really well together, they weren't like siblings in that they very rarely argued and he'd never seen them fighting.

James was also watching the kids whizz past but his thoughts were moving in a different direction. "I can't wait to see those two on brooms, Hermione is fearless on that bike!"

Emma was immediately concerned, strangely not for her daughter. "Are you sure Dudley is ready for that? He knows he's different but I would hate to see their friendship tested over this."

James shared her concern but had also made arrangements to offset any potential resentment or jealousy. "Dudley will be able to fly on a broom, just not on his own. Remus, Sirius and I will take him up with us until the kids are a bit older. After that, he'll always be able to hitch a ride."

Lily interrupted him, "Do you think those two will still have time to play with the kids? Remus has been very busy with the business while Aurora is claiming all Sirius's attention at the moment."

"You know the joke shop is busy at this time of the year, all the kids need to stock-up on pranking supplies before heading off to Hogwarts. As to the Sirius situation, since you engineered the whole

'let's introduce Sirius to Aurora' thing, then I think it would be hypocritical for you to complain about it now."

Dan still smiled everytime they mentioned their business, owning a joke shop! Sirius and James had bought control of an existing business and put Remus in charge of it. At the time, Dan had thought they were just creating a job for their best friend. Apparently, the renamed and overhauled Zonko's now made a fortune.

James also had other ideas to prevent any rifts in their family. "I've also sourced some small trail bikes with tiny engines and am having a track built at the Manor. They make a lot of noise without going too much faster than Hermione coming downhill on that yellow flying machine she has at the moment. The kids will all love them."

Lily thought this was a great idea but wasn't about to let her husband off the hook concerning his best friend. "What's that been for Sirius and Aurora now, four months? That must be some kind of record for him."

James was remaining firmly non-committal under the smirks of the two women. "Sirius and Aurora get on very well together, try not to look so smug about it dear."

Lily was trying to appear stern but failing miserably because her matchmaking was working so well. Now, if only she could get Remus interested in Amelia! Lily burst out laughing at the thought of them as a couple.

"Oh hell Dan, when my wife gets that look in her eyes, then it's time to head for the hills!"

Dan was also chuckling along with his friend, comfortable at continuing their banter. "Emma's the exact same James. Not content with snagging the perfect man for herself, she wants to see everyone else married off too!"

Emma came right back at them, her tongue firmly in her cheek. "When I think of what we've got, how could I not wish everyone to have the same?"

Lily was again struggling with her laughter as she pretended to be serious. "I know it's not our turn for the kids tonight Emma but we would be happy to take them if you two needed some alone time."

James came right back at his wife, wearing a pretend pout. "And what about our alone time Mrs Potter? I was looking forward to having my wife all to myself this evening."

"Oh Emma, I'll have to withdraw our services. My wonderful husband has just offered to take me out for dinner and dancing!"

James appeared to have been hit with a confundus charm. "I never said such a thing!"

Lily kissed him tenderly on the cheek. "You might not have said the words darling but I knew what you meant. My answer of course is yes. I'm really looking forward to my night out on the town with my handsome husband." This earned James another kiss before she turned toward Emma. "Perhaps you could help me choose what to wear tonight? I need to look my best."

The two women walked away and didn't get ten yards before bursting out laughing at their perceived victory.

Dan was now shaking his head in admiration. "Why do we even bother? Have we ever won against those two? You do realise you'll have to take Lily out now?"

James had a wide smile on his face. "To answer your questions, no, I don't think we've ever won. When it means I get to spend the evening in the company of a beautiful woman, I really don't mind losing. It's not exactly a hardship and I feel like celebrating anyway."

Dan's eyebrows shot up, "You closed the deal?"

James nodded. "We sold the property to a muggle land developer, cleared all our costs and are already in profit with another eleven properties still in our portfolio. Buying all those death eater properties at bargain basement prices will make the Potters and Blacks a fortune. You can bet Sirius will be wining and dining Aurora tonight."

"It's easy to forget that you both are titled and very wealthy. I will say I sleep better at night knowing that if anything should ever happen to me and Emma, Hermione would be well taken care of by you and Lily."

James actually looked embarrassed and decided it was time to get something off his chest. "I'm glad you feel that way and you know we both think of her as our daughter too. So much so that I did something I've been meaning to tell you about for quite a while now."

Dan was now wondering what was coming next, James didn't keep him waiting. "When we set up Dudley's trust fund I didn't want it to one day make a difference between our boys, I set the exact same fund up for Harry."

Dan was nodding, he knew that and was wondering where James was going with this. Again he didn't have long to wait as James just blurted it out.

"Using the exact same reasoning, I didn't want it to make a difference with Hermione either. I set up an identical fund for her as well!"

Dan was flabbergasted. "Just what size of fund are we talking here?"

James was relieved Dan appeared to be taking this so well. "With the life insurances, house insurance and a couple of other things, I rounded it off to a quarter of a million pounds, sterling. That's why that Dursley bitch was so keen to get custody of Dudley, she wanted control of the money. Our lawyers put paid to her attempts for good. Last we heard she was working in a local dairy farm, living in a tied cottage and barely making enough to keep herself in cheap vodka."

Dan hadn't heard the rest of what James had said, his brain couldn't get over the number he just mentioned. "Our Hermione's got a quarter of a million in the bank?"

"Oh no Dan, that was four years ago. It's a lot more than that now!"

"James, I don't know what to say?"

"Say you'll tell Emma for me! Take her out tomorrow night for a champagne evening and then break the news when she's merry. I'll tell Lily tonight!"

"You didn't even tell Lily? Tell me this isn't some pureblood bride price thing James? I would be very angry if I thought it was."

"Dan, this is one thing you and I agree on, there isn't enough gold in the world to buy that girl. I just want to offer them a measure of independence and have all the options open to them. Lily and I got married in the middle of a war, our options were limited by that. These three will have the world at their feet."

Dan glanced back over at the kids, their three were now sitting on the swings while Neville, Luna and Susan shot around the track on their bikes. The Potters lives might have been saved that Halloween night by Hermione inviting Harry back to play, the Grangers hadn't done too badly from that event either. He dreaded to think of the outcome if Hermione hadn't immediately taken to Harry James. He would have some flowers delivered to his wife tomorrow and then take Emma to their favourite restaurant before telling her of their friend's generosity. He expected tears, hell he was almost crying himself!

-oOoOo-

In a small but n ben outside Glengarry, a certain old wizard was also almost crying too, but for a very different reason. Albus was quite comfortable in his tiny cottage and had all the comforts of home, all except one. It had been over three and a half years since Albus Dumbledore had spoken to another human being.

Like everyone who worked in education, Albus had two calendars in his head. New Year might still be the first of January but a more important date would always be the first of September. That was when the real New Year started, a new year at Hogwarts! That he wasn't going to be there again this year to influence those young minds left Albus feeling sorry for himself, the isolation of his not so new life was beginning to wear him down.

He was still faced with the same old problem though, until Voldemort returned Albus Dumbledore was forced to live as an exile in his own country.

His eyes glanced over to the gilded framed front page of the Daily Prophet that was the only item hanging on the cottage walls. Albus couldn't remember the words but that didn't matter, he was willing to bet no one else could either. That's because the caricature that dominated the page simply demanded all your attention.

Throughout history, caricatures had been used to destroy reputations and even help bring down governments. The one of Albus Pariah of Witches and Babies Dumbledore was devastating. It portrayed him as a kind of psychotic Stromboli, the most evil puppet master ever to walk on the planet. Being a magical caricature meant it not only moved, but changed scene too.

A leering giant Dumbledore towered over a scene that was obviously the Potters confronting Voldemort with Albus pulling all the strings. That the paper had no idea what happened that night had never stopped them printing whatever they wanted before and didn't seem to matter here either. The Potters puppets broke their strings and escaped, leaving Voldemort and Dumbledore enraged.

The scene then revolved like a stage play to that of the Longbottoms confrontation against the Lestranges, again Albus was working all the puppets until the Longbottoms snapped their strings too. When the puppet master then presided over the Wizengamot, the string pulling reached a frantic level.

That single cartoon destroyed over a century of good works. That piece of shit would be all anyone in the magical community would ever remember about him and that was unacceptable to Albus.

It hung framed on his wall for two reasons, one was to pull him out of a funk on days like today. The other was to have it handy when he eventually defeated Voldemort and made his triumphant return to wizarding Britain. He intended to ram the vile cartoon right up Peter White's arse without removing it from the sturdy frame. Albus would then take a picture of that and it would then have pride of place on his wall. He might even consider selling it to the Prophet, see if it could boost their sales! 'Editor Framed' was a headline Albus dreamed about. To be honest, he'd nothing else to do.

A/N Thanks for reading.

## Chapter 8

Monday 2nd September. St Andrews P. S. Crawley.

Harry, Hermione, Dudley and Neville were enjoying their first ever break at their new school. The kids were desperate to do a bit of exploring but were currently waiting on Susan and Luna, both girls had been experiencing a completely different type of desperate. That the six made up almost a quarter of the primary one class at St Andrews had them settling in very quickly. The lovely sunny day was calling to them through the large glass windows of the single story brick structure. While they waited, the three boys couldn't help but smile as Hermione raved about how much she'd enjoyed her first class and was looking forward to more.

The smiles changed the instant that a voice they all knew well cried out in obvious pain. The four were moving at speed in the direction of the shout without a word having to be spoken between them. They rounded a corner to see a large boy with blond hair was currently trying to part Luna from hers. "Listen squirt, when I say I want your lunch money, you hand it over. That's the way things work here."

His two friends were laughing while holding Susan by the arms. The four showed no intention of slowing down as they raced along the corridor.

"Oh, what's this? Your little friends..."

The big bully's words were cut off and his grip on Luna's hair broken when Dudley and Neville hit him. There were no punches thrown or fighting moves used, their concern for getting Luna free saw them just run straight into him at speed. The top of Dudley's head caught the bigger boy just above his chin and burst his mouth open. Neville's shoulder hit the big blond in the chest as all three ended up on the ground, the two younger on top.

Harry and Hermione flew at the other two that were holding Susan. Both these boys had witnessed what just happened to their friend so now knew these kids weren't going to stop. They aimed punches at their intruding would-be attackers. Susan was struggling like crazy now and it threw their aim off. Harry was missed completely as he barged into the bigger boy, forcing him to release his grip on Susan

to maintain his balance. Hermione wasn't so lucky and the boy's punch caught her on the cheek. Her yelp of pain signalled a change in the fight as both bigger boys suddenly found themselves knocked off their feet and about five yards along the corridor. Harry was standing there, fists clenched and seething with anger when a shout froze them all in place.

"What's going on here?" Demanded a teacher they hadn't met yet, effectively ending the fight.

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Duncan Murdock was used to getting his own way. His father was a local shop owner and, more importantly, leader of the local council. He wasn't sure what happened earlier but someone was going to pay for it. Duncan's lips were burst, one tooth was broken and at least one more knocked loose. He didn't really have to fake the tears as he spun his story about being violently attacked in the corridor, Duncan was in a lot of pain and not getting much sympathy from the headmistress.

The three ten year old boys thought they would rule the school this year, only to be knocked on their arses by a gang of five year olds on their first day back. Duncan wasn't worried though, after today the six of them would be gone from St Andrews. Between his BAFTA winning performance in the headmistress's office and his father's influence, those primary one brats were toast! There was no other outcome possible.

They were dismissed and walked out the office, past the six who had attacked them. Duncan would have liked to give them all an evil grin but that wasn't possible at the moment. He was waiting on his father arriving to take him to the dentist, confident in the fact that he'd never see these little thugs again.

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Claire Stewart had been a teacher for twenty-nine years, the last eight of them as headmistress of St Andrews, yet had never seen anything like this. Six primary one children allegedly attacking three older boys they'd never met before. Entirely unprovoked, and on their very first day of school too? There was something fishy about this and Claire was determined to get to the bottom of it. To add



even more intrigue, all six students were listed under two local addresses yet appeared unrelated.

Jenny in the office was trying to get hold of some parents but it was time to have a talk with the kids. As they filed into her room, she couldn't help but notice that the three girls had been crying, and the three boys were trying to comfort them, most unusual.

Claire tried to put them at ease, she wanted to get to the truth here and needed the group to relax and be comfortable. Getting into a fight and then ending up in the headmistress's office on their first day must be quite traumatic for them.

"I'm Mrs Stewart, your headmistress. As this is your first day and we don't know one another yet, could you tell me a little about yourselves? I'm particularly interested in why you are all listed at only two addresses."

Dudley was sitting with a bump on his head and blood on his new St Andrews school jumper. He decided to speak first. "I live with Harry and we're cousins, Hermione lives next door. We grew up with Neville, Susan and Luna as all our parents and guardians used to share childcare one day a week and work the rest. We all wanted to go to the same school and, because three of us stayed close to St Andrews, we all came here."

The kids had all been well coached on how to answer these types of questions, they just didn't think they would need to do it today with the headmistress. Neville went next, "Harry's mum is my godmother and both my parents work with Susan's guardian."

Luna chipped in with her bit. "My mum is best friends with both Neville's and Harry's mum, they've been best friends since they all went to school together."

Hermione couldn't sit there and not say anything. "I met Harry when we were at the baby and toddler clinic, we've been best friends ever since. Uncle James bought the house next door to ours and we live in both."

The knock on the door stopped any more being said as Jenny introduced the Potters before showing them into the room. "Ah, Mr and Mrs Potter, I'm Mrs Stewart. I'm pleased you're here as I was

just about to ask the children what happened today. Will any of the other parents be joining us?"

"I think you'll find that the Grangers and Potters are listed as the emergency contacts for the whole group. After dropping the kids off this morning, the Grangers had to return to work, we weren't expecting an emergency on the first day." Lily was now hunkered down, examining the forming bruise on Hermione's cheek and not missing the blood on Dudley's jumper. "I'm also very interested in what happened here. We left our children in your care yet find Hermione bruised and Dudley bloody!"

Dudley tried to put her mind at rest. "It's not my blood mum, the big prat had Luna by the hair."

Luna gave a weak smile, "He didn't know my friends were just around the corner waiting on us."

Susan started the story from the beginning. "Luna and me had gone to the toilet. On the way back, we were so busy chatting that we never saw the three boys. Luna bumped into one of them and apologised right away. He quickly grabbed her by the hair and said sorry wasn't good enough, it was going to cost Luna her lunch money. We both said no way and the other two grabbed me by the arms, the biggest one now pulled Luna's hair harder and made her cry out. I was struggling to get free and then I spied these four coming racing round the corner. Neville and Dudley pushed the boy off Luna. Harry knocked the boy down on my right but the one still holding my left managed to punch Hermione in the face before Harry could get to him. When he knocked the last one down, the teacher came and shouted."

Lily was certain how Harry had managed to knock both boys down and wanted to direct attention away from it. "Dudley, how did you get blood on your school jumper?"

"My head hit the boy in the mouth and then Neville and me landed on top of him."

James was also keen to wrap this up before awkward questions could be asked. "Headmistress, what happens now?"

Claire thought carefully about her answer before replying. "I've already spoken to the three older boys. As you can imagine, they told a slightly different story. I would like to assure you, St Andrews doesn't tolerate bullying in any form so I will be making arrangements to speak to them again." Both parents and the six kids were pleased to hear this but Claire wasn't finished yet. "I feel that I must point out that had the children fetched a teacher, the problem would have been quickly dealt with. I can appreciate seeing their friends in that situation could influence their decision, that doesn't change the fact that it was the wrong one. As this is their first day, I'm prepared to let this incident go with just a talking too. Do you all agree?"

Lily and James both nodded their heads as the children appeared relieved. James attempted to explain their actions. "These children have been raised together since they were toddlers. It's understandable they would react that way when one of them was being bullied. We'll have a good talk about it when we get them home."

Claire was happy with that. She fully expected to hear from the senior Murdock today but she would be ready for him. Finding out his precious and perfect son had been 'beaten up' by two five year olds would have his blood pressure rising.

The kids were all leaving school with their heads down until James cheered them up. "I think after that, we could all do with some ice cream! Just don't mention it to the Grangers."

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Dan was currently treating young Duncan in his chair. Unfortunately though, he had no way to shut up Larry. The boy's father loved the sound of his own voice, especially when he could climb on his soap box about something. Larry had been elected to lead the council and treated the appointment as if he'd been awarded the scarlet and ermine robes of the House of Lords.

"I can promise you Daniel, I'll soon get to the bottom of this. St Andrews has always been the best school in Crawley but that headmistress has let the place go to pot. Gangs of hooligans now roaming the corridors of a primary school? I shall be demanding

action. When decent children like my Duncan and his friends can't walk through the school safely, then something must be done."

Having to work through his lunch break to deal with this emergency was bad enough, being forced to endure this blowhard too was above and beyond the call of dental duty.

His thoughts, and Duncan's examination, were interrupted by Emma bursting into the room. "I just got a call from Lily, three older bullies picked on Luna and Susan today. The other four got into the fight and burst one of the bullies mouths but Hermione got punched in the face!"

Emma and Dan glanced at both father and son before Dan made the decision. "I'm sorry Larry but you'll have to find a new dentist. That someone the age and size of your boy here could punch my little girl! Well, just take your son and get out."

Larry couldn't believe what he was hearing. "Are you accusing my son of being a bully? I'll have you know..."

Emma wasn't about to listen to this prick spout any more of his crap, especially in their own surgery during their lunch break. "Let me tell you something Larry, we've known all those children involved, and their parents, since the kids were toddlers. Harry and Dudley's parents are Lord and Lady Potter, Susan's guardian is a chief inspector with the police. Neville's parents are officers in her department. Luna's mum is a research scientist while her dad is a newspaper editor. None of them are going to be intimidated by the empty threats of a local councillor, neither are we! Take your bully of a son and get him out of our surgery, it's still our decision who we take on as patients."

"Come on Duncan, it's time we changed to better dentists anyway. I shall be contacting headmistress Stewart to ensure this matter gets investigated fully. I will not stand by and watch my son being cast in the role of a bully, nor do I believe a word of what you just said. If there was a lord staying in Crawley, I would certainly know about it!"

Both marched out their surgery as Dan spoke softly to his wife. "How's Hermione?"

"She's got a bruise on her cheek but otherwise ok, she's been hurt worse coming off that bike of hers. Lily took the pain away but didn't want to heal the bruise as Hermione will have school tomorrow. They got the kids out of there before anyone could ask how Harry managed to dump two bigger boys on their bums."

This generated a smile from the parents, both could easily imagine Harry's reaction to anyone hitting Hermione.

Emma lost her smile as she described what had actually happened. "Duncan must have been the one who grabbed Luna by the hair. Lily said Dudley's head hit the bully in the mouth as he and Neville tackled the boy to the floor. Lily and James are taking the six of them to Fortescue's."

That returned the smiles, Hermione would probably think a bruise on the cheek was worth it for a sundae.

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Harry was climbing into bed but James could see something was still troubling his son. "Dad, I'm sorry but when that boy punched Hermione, I couldn't help myself."

James lovingly ruffled his son's hair. "Harry, in the circumstances I would expect nothing less. Never let worrying about anyone's reactions stop you from protecting our girl. That's always the most important thing."

Harry smiled and gave a 'thanks dad' but there was something else there. "Dad, why are we not allowed to tell Uncle Dan and Aunt Em about the ice cream? I don't think I could lie to them dad."

"And you'll never have to Harry. They knew where we were today, I was just making a bad dentist joke."

Harry appeared relieved, "So they know we went to Fortescue's?"

"Yes Harry, parents know everything. Just as I know Hermione is standing outside your door, with Paddy under her arm and waiting for me to leave."

Hermione decided, since she was already busted, just to march right in there. Paddy found himself placed at the bottom of the bed since she would be cuddling into Harry tonight. She climbed in with Harry and snuggled.

James kissed both of them on the forehead before leaving them to get some sleep, they'd had an exciting day.

Dudley was also trying to apologise and getting the same response from his mum. "Don't worry about it Dudley, standing up for your friends is always the right thing to do. I'm proud of you son."

Dudley was also troubled by something he didn't understand. "Mum, why did that boy pick on someone smaller than him, a girl too?"

"There are lots of reasons why people bully Dudley but their victims are always smaller or weaker than they are. If he picked on someone his own size, he would probably have gotten beaten up. Well, beaten up worse than you and Neville did to him."

This put a smile on Dudley's face as his mum kissed him on the forehead and left. Lily met her husband on the landing. "Is there any point in checking our Hermione's room?"

Lily was smiling as she asked the question and was answered by a grinning husband. "We always knew today was going to be a big one for them, and that was before the fight."

Lily was now struggling not to giggle. "We were thinking St Andrews wouldn't know what hit it when the six of them went to school. It looked like Duncan Murdock didn't know quite what hit him either."

Both walked off, arm in arm and headed for bed. They had the kids for two nights and then they needed to make their way to Hogwarts as Dan and Emma took over the parenting role. Life was good for their extended family.

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Friday 13th November 1987. Crouch Residence.

Barty was enjoying a rare glass of firewhiskey. After his wife's death, his habit of an occasional nightcap had rapidly escalated to every

night and then more than one glass. The minister of magic had to be as ruthless with himself as he was in his dealings with other people, he'd stopped drinking completely.

Tonight was a special occasion though, Rabastan Lestrangle had gotten himself kissed by a dementor as he tried to escape. That only left Bellatrix from the group that his son was supposed to be part of. Barty thought it would be better if she lived for many years yet. Losing her master, husband, leg and freedom in such a short space of time had pushed the bitch over the edge. While her sanity before these events was already questionable, there were now no doubts. Bellatrix Lestrangle was certified as an insane psychotic killer and would only leave Azkaban in a wooden box.

The new minister had quietly made changes at the wizarding prison, starting with the warden. John Quinn reminded Barty of himself, the man had lost his entire family to the death eaters and revenge was all he had left. The warden would personally ensure that the ten years they spent under his care would be their worst, or perhaps their last, decade on this Earth.

Since taking over Azkaban, every member of staff that John had appointed had all suffered loss at the hands of the death eaters. He now had a very loyal and motivated staff under him.

Azkaban could be counted on to whittle the death eater numbers down even further, with those who do survive their full ten year term being unrecognisable as the people who entered the prison. All Barty had to do was sit back and not look too closely at some of the reports that passed over his desk.

John was being very careful not to have any recognisable patterns emerge so Barty was counting on another three or four death eaters not seeing out their full prison term. Now that was something worth drinking to.

-oOoOo-

Saturday 16th July 1988. Potter/Granger residence, Crawley.

Harry was complaining bitterly about having to wear a skirt, that was until Hermione said she thought he looked handsome in his kilt.

Dudley tried not to laugh at the sudden change that came over Harry, he would be wanting to wear it all the time now.

Both mothers were positioning the three of them to take photograph after photograph. The two boys in their identical kilts and Hermione in a periwinkle blue dress, a dress that drew compliments from her best friends. Dan and James were also bedecked in Black tartan kilts as the families got ready to portkey up to Hogwarts.

The wedding of Sirius Black to Hogwarts professor Aurora Sinistra was one of the biggest events of the summer. The kids were all happy about getting a new aunt they liked very much, they were also going to be visiting the school they'd heard so much about. All six friends were soon sitting together inside the great hall, not knowing where to look first as they were surrounded by wonders.

Lily, Emma and Maia had no such trouble, they were all gathered around Alice or rather the little bundle she carried in her arms. Two-month-old Jane Longbottom was the unknowing main attraction, until the bride showed up. All three women had already offered Alice that they would care for the little girl when she wanted to return to work.

When the music started, gasps were heard as the beautiful bride slowly made her way to the front of the great hall where a kilted Sirius and Remus waited on her. Harry felt Hermione's hand slip into his as they watched the ceremony. They hated having to have even more pictures taken, loved the food, got bored with the speeches yet enjoyed the dancing. It was three happy but tired kids who eventually went to bed at the Grangers.

It was late when Harry made his way to Hermione and Paddy was relegated to the foot of the bed once more. They snuggled as usual but Harry had something important he wanted to say before they fell asleep.

"Hermione, I asked my mum why Sirius was getting married to Aunt Aurora. She told me it was because they loved each other and wanted to spend the rest of their lives together, is that right?"

Hermione nodded her head in the darkness, "I think so Harry."



Harry didn't think his mum would mislead him but wanted to check with Hermione first. He was now more determined than ever to ask what he needed to. "Hermione, will you marry me?"

The little girl gave it some thought before answering. "Harry, I think we're too young to get married."

Harry was now the one deep in thought. "You'll be older on your birthday, will that be old enough?"

Hermione had to concede that she didn't know for sure but still didn't think she'd be old enough.

Harry's brow was now knitted in a mixture of concentration and determination. "Well then, I'll just ask you every birthday until you think we're old enough!"

Hermione wore a wide smile. "That's brilliant! I love that idea Harry James."

It was two smiling children who were soon fast asleep, contently cuddling into each other.

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Tuesday 9th May 1989. Grounds of Hogwarts Castle.

Albus was crying invisible tears, as he stood disillusioned outside the greenhouses at Hogwarts. He was drinking in the sights and sounds of the children as if it were the finest of wines. This is what his soul craved, human contact.

It was only after Kitty told him he'd been sitting around the but n ben, wearing nothing but the same underwear for the last three weeks, that Albus realised he had to take drastic measures. The old wizard thought that he would be fine, safe and snug in his little highland hideaway. He hadn't anticipated the effect his self-imposed isolation would have on him, depression had crept up and almost consumed the greatest wizard of the age.

Just observing the children as they made their way to and from Herbology classes made him feel so much better. He was also finding the draw of being this close to Hogwarts irresistible, the

castle was calling to him. Yes it was undoubtedly foolish and certainly dangerous. It was also something he would have to do if Albus was ever to be able to return to his cottage.

Entering the castle was like walking through a cleansing waterfall, he felt his cares and worries just wash away as Albus Dumbledore was back where he truly belonged. He must have spent hours aimlessly roaming the corridors, Albus even found himself running his hand along the stone walls as he walked. It was as if he needed confirmation from every one of his senses that he was indeed back inside Hogwarts.

The old wizard found himself drawn to an unused classroom that appeared to have decade's worth of stuff stored within, there was one item that he recognised immediately.

The mirror of erised was an extremely powerful magical device and easily saw past his invisibility, Albus watched transfixed as the scene in the mirror played out.

Albus Dumbledore was being carried on the shoulders of seventh year prefects into the packed great hall of Hogwarts. Everyone in the hall was on their feet, cheering, applauding and throwing their hats into the air. As his party approached the staff table, Minerva moved from the head's chair and offered it to Albus. He half-heartedly attempted to decline but the crowd wouldn't be dissuaded from their task, he was carried to the chair before being lowered into it. This raised the tempo of the cheering to new heights as Albus basked in the adulation.

The real Albus Dumbledore felt his spirits rise even higher, just from watching his inner desires come true. It was also at this moment Albus had his epiphany, he now knew when Tom would return. The evil wizard had worked tirelessly to render himself immortal, what was a mere decade when compared to immortality. Tom would return when the one prophesied to defeat him attended Hogwarts.

Albus now had the time and place. More important than that though, he now had something to focus on. He also understood that he couldn't spend the intervening years sequestered away in Glengarry, that was a quick route to going crazy. While the risk of discovery might be high, he had to weigh that up against the certainty of losing his sanity staring at four walls. Sojourns to Hogwarts, and perhaps

even further afield, would ensure Albus was ready for Tom Riddle when he returned.

That would also be the signal to begin his transformation from Albus Pariah of Witches and Babies back to Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore, the greatest wizard of the age.

-oOoOo-

Friday August 17th 1990. Potter Manor.

The six kids were all on brooms at Potter manor, most of their summer days were spent here. Neither the ministry of magic nor dentistry allowed for a couple of months holidays at the summer. The six had an obstacle course set up and were whizzing around it. Harry, Hermione, Susan and Neville were all vying for the lead, Luna with Dudley on board trailed on behind.

Dudley had very quickly come to the conclusion that he absolutely loved flying, he just didn't consider what the other four did to be flying. Dudley was of the opinion that, if he was going to be upside down or corkscrewing, he wanted a rollercoaster car, complete with obligatory safety harness under him. As far as he was concerned, the other four were crazy and he would stick with safe, sensible Luna.

When two on two Quidditch was played, they would fly gently around the match and act as referees. They all quickly noticed Sirius apparating beside James, Lily and little Jane, five brooms flew down to greet him.

It only took one look at his face to see something was seriously wrong. Hermione had gotten there a fraction ahead of everyone else so asked the question. "Sirius, what's wrong? Is something the matter with Aunt Aurora?"

"No Hermione, she's fine. We were at St Mungo's for her check-up when there was an emergency case rushed in from the ministry." Sirius now had some very worried children floating on brooms in front of him, Neville, Susan and Luna especially. He didn't keep them waiting. "Luna, there was an accident in your mother's lab. Your dad is already at St Mungo's, I told him I would come and fetch you."

Dudley was behind Luna on the broom and had his arms around her to hold on, he held her tighter to offer support. None of the kids said a word as James asked the all-important question. "How is Maia?"

"She's pretty bad Prancer, only the fact that they got her to the hospital so quickly gives her a fighting chance."

Lily had Jane in her arms and took command. "Kids, into the house! Quick wash and change, then we all go to St Mungo's."

Dudley discovered that, just because Luna didn't fly fast and reckless, it didn't mean she couldn't. They shot toward the house like a bat out of hell and didn't dismount at the open door. Luna didn't follow the stairs either, no gentle sweeping curves for Miss Lovegood. It was vertical up the stairwell to the third floor before barrel rolling into horizontal flight and only stopping when they reached her room. The stop was abrupt and nearly threw him off but Luna spoke her first words since the devastating news. "Hurry Dudley, we've got to get there. I want to see my mum!"

She dived in her room and Dudley ran down the two doors to his, emerging mere minutes later pulling on a clean shirt. Luna was just emerging from her room, adjusting her clothes as they ran down the stairs. Sirius was waiting for them at the floo and they could hear the others pouring down the stairs behind them.

Sirius took them first, heading immediately for the exact department. Frank and Alice, with a heavily pregnant Aurora were already sitting in the waiting room. Alice took the girl on her knee so she could speak to the clearly upset girl, Dudley sat on the seat next to her.

James and Lily arrived with the rest of the kids, Jean wanted to be the one sitting on her mother's knee so Luna transferred to Lily.

None of her friends knew what to say and all the adults were quiet too. Only Jane telling her mother about the lovely morning she had broke the silence. The two year old had no idea what was going on and her little voice was a welcome break to the oppressive silence and dragging time while they waited for news. All eyes fixed on the door at the sound of approaching footsteps, only to be disappointed with the appearance of Aunt Amelia.

Sirius had his arm around Aurora and the other two ladies had children on their knees, she motioned toward James and Frank to come outside for a quick word.

"The experiment Maia was working on backfired and blasted right through the safety shields she'd erected. It blew her across the room and wrecked her lab. Only about every bloody alarm in the ministry being set off allowed us to discover this and get her here as quickly as we did. The longer they leave us waiting for news, the better Maia's chances of pulling through are. You wouldn't have given a bronze knut for them earlier."

The three attempted to school their faces into neutrality as they walked back into the room, all thought of Luna as a member of their family. It was no accident that the kids referred to all the adults in the group, who weren't their parents, as aunt or uncle.

Amelia appeared to get her wish as it felt like hours before Xeno returned. He was wearing his usual mix of outlandish colours that just seemed to emphasise the greyness of his complexion. Luna shot into his arms and both held each other tight as the tears fell like April showers. "Oh my darling Luna, it's going to be all right. The healers weren't sure if she would make it but your mum's a fighter, she refused to leave us. She's going to be in hospital for a while but she's over the worst of it now."

Luna was trying to speak between sobs, "I want my mum, I need to see her."

Xeno held her tighter. "The healers have put her in a magical sleep and she's covered in bandages, are you sure you want to see her love?"

Luna could only nod as Lily approached the relieved father and daughter. "Xeno, you know Luna is more than welcome to stay with us until Maia recovers. You're welcome to stay too, if you want?"

"Thanks Lily, I know Luna loves staying at your house and that would certainly help her mother get better. The thought of me taking care of our little girl has given her sleepless nights before, knowing she's staying with her friends will allow Maia just to concentrate on getting better."

He gave his first smile toward his daughter. "If you're ready love, I'll take you in to see her. I just don't want you to be frightened by what you see. All you have to do is keep saying to yourself that mum's going to get better."

Luna turned to face her friends, noticing that they all had tears in their eyes too. "Could you guys come with me?"

Xeno unfortunately had to say no. "Luna dear, they won't allow that many people in at the same time to see your mum."

Dudley came forward and took her hand, no words were spoken as the three of them left to see Maia.

James was also ready to leave. "I'll go and tell Remus before collecting Dan and Emma. Padfoot, are you and Aurora coming to the manor?"

It was Aurora that answered for both of them. "Sorry James but Sirius needs to stay here with me."

This had Sirius confused. "I thought you would have wanted to go, get a chance to put your feet up?"

"Sorry dear but our child has other plans for us tonight, my contractions have started."

Harry looked toward Hermione for an explanation. "It means the baby's coming."

Sirius started to lose it as panic set in. "Stay calm love, I'll soon have you at St Mungo's."

Frank's hand on his shoulder offered reassurance. "I think it's the father here that needs to stay calm. You've both been in St Mungo's for the last three hours. Lily's already gone to fetch a healer, your job is to reassure Aurora she didn't make the biggest mistake of her life when she married you!"

This was enough for the real Sirius to surface. "No problem then, greatest day of my life. I think this one might just run it a close second though." He smiled and kissed his wife as Lily arrived back

with a healer. The world was about to be blessed with another member of the Black family.

-oOoOo-

Tuesday 28th August 1990. Diagon Alley.

Sirius was making his way into Gringotts. Even only having three hours sleep didn't warrant not answering an urgent summons from the goblins. Sirius couldn't remember the last time he had a good night's sleep. Actually, that was a lie. He knew the exact date, a day that appeared to be going as bad as a day could suddenly was one of the most joyous of his entire life. So much so, they commemorated it forever with a name.

Joy Corina Black came in to the world kicking and screaming, and had hardly stopped since! At three a.m. it was easy to think they had made a mistake with the little terror's name. Then, totally unexpected, she would quieten down and those baby blue eyes would melt your heart and you could lose your soul in them. Sirius thought that the little bundle currently held in his arms was the most beautiful thing in the world, then Joy was usually sick over him and the crying would start again.

He was still smiling though, Sirius found he loved being a father more every day. That, and he'd been assured the crying would stop soon.

He found his account manager waiting on him and was expecting bad news.

"Lord Black, your mother passed away yesterday."

Sirius found the lack of emotion that statement caused in him alarming. He'd steeled himself, thinking that the woman was still his mother and he really should feel something. Apparently his new family had totally replaced his old one. Sirius knew he would have been devastated if Maia hadn't pulled through that day. His main concern here was why his instructions hadn't been followed, goblins were usually such sticklers for that.

"I thought we had agreed what should happen next, the house would be emptied and sold."

"You are of course correct but there was an unforeseen complication."

"What complication?"

"We don't know what to do with the young boy who's been living there since he was a mere baby."

A/N Thanks for reading



## Chapter 9

Still Tuesday 28th August 1990. Potter Manor.

The group had gotten together at the Potters, originally to offer support to Sirius over the death of his mother. They were now listening to an entirely different tale.

Emma just had to interrupt. "Sirius, he's a child. How could you leave him there?"

"Yes Emma, Draco is the same age as most of our lot. I can assure you that's where all similarities end. Draco has been raised by a vile, possibly even deranged, woman who was my mother. Had I known at the time, then you can be certain I would have taken action. No child deserves to be raised in an environment like that, I'm speaking from personal experience here. Without my father's influence, my mother was apparently even worse in her later years. Draco is a boy who wouldn't last five minutes with our kids."

Emma wasn't convinced. "How could you possibly know that Sirius? Yes, ours are certainly a tight-knit bunch but they do have other friends at school."

"Emma, you don't have to be a genius to work out what would happen seconds after Draco called Hermione a filthy mudblood."

The gasps of shock from the magical people there let Emma know this was a bad insult. "Can I assume that's not something I want my daughter to hear?"

It was Lily who answered. "That is something I've not heard in many years, the last person to say that to me ended up leading Voldemort to Privet Drive. I had hoped never to hear those words uttered again. It's probably the most insulting thing you can say to someone like Hermione or I. It refers to their blood being dirty, as opposed to pure."

Sirius nodded. "Lily, you know that's a phrase I would never use. My mother suffered from no such compunction. The boy Draco Malfoy is like a throwback to the bad old days. He still believes that one day purebloods like him will rule and he'll be the head of the Black family, my mother apparently spoke of little else. If you ignore the fact that I

banished his mother from the family, after she got sentenced to Azkaban, Harry, Joy and I would all need to die before it could even become a possibility. Draco has been taught these deaths are mere problems that can and should be overcome."

Sirius leaned over his wife to kiss his beautiful baby daughter, needing the comfort that action gave him before he could continue. "When I ran away from home to live with James, I was disinherited in favour of my younger brother. He willingly joined the death eaters and was the apple of my mother's eye. Regulus apparently got on the wrong side of Voldemort over something and paid the ultimate price. My mother's heart was so corrupted, she still supported the dark wanker after he murdered her son. Never let it be said that pure blood supremacists made any sense, I thought though we'd seen the last of them."

Alice then asked the question that they all wanted to know the answer to. "What's going to happen to Draco now Sirius?"

"I approached Barty Crouch and leaned on him a little, he wasn't unreasonable. The ministry should never have awarded custody of the child to my mother, they would have been better dropping Draco off on some random doorstep. I got my way and the proposal will be discussed in the Wizengamot chamber tomorrow morning. I've asked for Narcissa to be freed from Azkaban early on compassionate grounds, she's the best person to look after Draco now. I will allow them both to live at Grimmauld and continue the stipend I paid to my mother, this should allow her to at least undo some of the damage my mother has inflicted on the child."

This satisfied all of them. Sirius was attempting to get the boy's mother out of prison while keeping a roof over their heads and paying for their upkeep. He really couldn't do much more.

His wife though asked the really awkward question. "Sirius, what happens if they don't let Draco's mother out of Azkaban?"

"Love, the boy is no legal relation to me. His mother being disowned from the House of Black automatically applied to him as well. I suppose Andi might step-in but he would be handed over to the ministry child welfare services. I know that's not the answer most of you wanted to hear but that's the way it has to be. Everyone in this room totally rejects the pureblood supremacists' way of life, we put

our own lives on the line to do so. Draco Malfoy will find out the hard way that those days my mother harked back to are long gone, it's not our job to teach him. We've each played our part in shaping the magical community but we can't personally save everyone. I did the best I could but I will not have that boy anywhere near Joy."

Emma wanted to say more but Lily's hand on her arm held her back. There were clearly things going on under the surface that she did not appreciate. She trusted Lily to explain it to her later and was much heartened by Xeno's take on the situation.

"The Wizengamot hasn't changed that much over the years. There is more chance of that imbecile Cornelius Fudge becoming the next minister than there is of them keeping a pureblood mother in Azkaban. Especially when they have a perfect excuse to set her free presented to them on a plate."

Amelia agreed with the newspaperman's assessment. "Barty is a political animal, the ministry have undoubtedly made a bad mistake here. He'll use this opportunity to turn a negative into a positive, show the caring face of the ministry to the public."

Further discussion was halted as the sound of engines got progressively louder, Dan had returned with the kids and their quad bikes. Lily, Alice and Maia left to perform cleaning charms on their laughing children and a beaming Dan Granger. The dentist loved his quad as much as any of the children did. Having to sit and watch while Remus, Sirius and James taught the kids how to fly brooms had left him wanting something he could teach them on his own. The quad bikes had been love at first sight for all of them, their brood were rapidly becoming a bunch of speed freaks.

-oOoOo-

Wednesday 29th August 1990.

Sirius was waiting at the dock for the boat from Azkaban to arrive. His initial plan was to take Narcissa directly to Grimmauld Place, hopefully then to never hear the name Malfoy again. That plan was shot to pieces the instant he laid eyes on his cousin. Narcissa had easily been the vainest of the three Black sisters, a lengthy stay in Azkaban would appear to have cured the youngest sibling of that

affliction. Narcissa was two years younger than Andi but currently appeared at least two decades older.

Her hair hung lank, unwashed and uncared for. This added emphasis to her gaunt and haunted appearance. Her eyes never rested as they constantly searched for danger, she seemed ready to either bolt or collapse at the first loud noise. Her appearance reminded Sirius of a character in the kids' favourite movie. The once proud pureblood Narcissa Malfoy now resembled the scarecrow. With the evidence currently in front of him, Sirius was glad never to have set foot in that place.

"Hello Cissi, long time no see. You look like shit!"

She appeared to take great confidence from recognising him, a spark of life appeared to enter her eyes. "Sirius Black, nice to see some things haven't changed while I was away. You're still an arsehole. What are you doing here anyway?"

"I got you out of that place on compassionate grounds, I also came to personally deliver an apology. In fairness though, I just found out. My mother somehow gained custody of your son and has raised him. It only came to light a few days ago when she died."

"I thought I had another eighteen months left to serve. I spent years asking what happened to my son, the bastards wouldn't tell me anything. We both know Walburga was not right in the head Sirius, how's Draco?"

"He's fit and healthy Cissi. His attitude is probably what you would expect from someone raised by my mother, warped and twisted. You'll have your work cut out to repair the damage. I was originally going to take you straight there but you appear to be dead on your feet. I'm going to take you to St Mungo's and then contact Andi. She might agree to look in on him until you're fit enough, I don't want him near my wife or baby daughter."

Narcissa didn't have any energy left to ask more questions, never mind argue with Sirius. Yes she was desperate to see Draco but would prefer to at least have bathed and changed first. Her baby would be too young to remember his mother. Narcissa didn't want to be looking like this at his first sight of her.

Sirius portkeyed both of them to St Mungo's before arranging a private room for Narcissa, then he floocalled Andi.

Sirius hated telling her this way but it was necessary. "Hi Andi, I need to ask you a massive favour. I've got Cissi out of Azkaban but she really needs at least a few days in St Mungo's before she'll be fit enough to look after her son."

Andi sighed, she wasn't sure about this but provisionally agreed. "Sirius, I'll come to St Mungo's and talk with Cissi. If she's still the same stuck-up bitch that wanted nothing to do with Ted or I, then I won't be there for very long."

Sirius gladly accepted that promise, it was probably the best he could hope for.

Andi promptly arrived, took one look at her broken young sister lying in the bed and burst into tears. Now she was washed and in a hospital gown, Narcissa resembled a skeleton more than a scarecrow. Andi soon had her baby sister's slight form wrapped in her arms as both cried while trying to apologise for deeds and words from years ago.

Sirius tactically withdrew, there must be a mug of coffee somewhere in this place with his name on it. He returned later to find both of them chatting while a nurse hovered with a tray of potions.

"Sirius, they want to fill me with potions that will have me sleep while healing. I wanted to find out about Draco first."

"As I said he's healthy and, unfortunately, the spitting image of his father. You can both stay at Grimmauld and I'll arrange a stipend to support you both for now. The moment your husband is free, all that stops and Grimmauld goes up for sale. Lucius will never set foot in a property I own."

Narcissa almost managed a smile, it was fuelled by relief. "Thank you Sirius, that's more than fair. I have no idea what financial position we're in at the moment so I really appreciate you doing this for my son and I."

"Narcissa, I may hate your husband but I would never have stood back and let Draco be raised by my mother, I honestly didn't know."

Andi will keep me updated with what is happening as I need to go now."

Narcissa started to take her potions as Andi kissed his cheek. "Give my love to Aurora and Joy, I'll call later."

With that, Sirius left. He'd done his best for the boy, the rest was up to his mother.

-oOoOo-

Saturday 26th May 1991.

Dudley had known for years this day would come and actually found himself comforting his mum. The Potter / Granger family had held a discussion on the subject earlier and she was now in his room to see if he was really all right with this.

"Honestly mum, I'm fine. This will work out for everybody. With you and dad now at Hogwarts, Harry and Hermione will be looked after. I'll be staying with Aunt Em and Uncle Dan who'll only have one kid to concentrate on, I'll probably end up spoilt rotten." Dudley's smile didn't seem to alleviate any of his mum's concerns so he kept going.

"I'll still be going to school with Luna and either you or dad will be home every weekend."

Lily felt terrible, almost as if he was abandoning her son. Hearing Dudley rationalising the situation just made her feel worse. "I'm really sorry son. Minerva is finding it just too difficult teaching and running Hogwarts. Your dad was faced with the choice of going full time or quitting while she got someone else. With your dad, Harry and Hermione there full time..."

"Mum, please stop beating yourself up over this. I'll be fine at the Grangers and the whole family will be together for Christmas at the manor." They were both sitting on his bed as Dudley lent his head on his mum's shoulder.

"You've told us all the story of how you and my mother stopped being close when you headed off to Hogwarts. That's never going to happen with us, you've seen to that. I've been included in magic from the time we were old enough to know what magic was, I can do

a lot of the stuff you don't need a wand for. You and my mother never had that chance. We've all got our mirrors and Uncle Remus is working on a special one as a surprise."

This had Lily wrap her arm around her boy, she was so proud of him. She was also curious though, having heard nothing about these 'special' mirrors.

Dudley explained some of it. "How do you think the girls would cope without their fix of Neighbours?(1) What would a Saturday night be for Harry and Neville without Match of the day? (2) Uncle Remus is working on ones that will enlarge to the size of a small TV screen and Uncle Dan has converted a camera tripod for me to use. I can tape the daily episodes of Neighbours and beam them to Hogwarts on a Sunday afternoon for Hermione and Susan. I'm hoping the guys will still be able to watch the football with Uncle Dan and me on a Saturday night."

This actually saw a slight smile play on Lily's lips. Dan had introduced all the kids to football, even taking them all to watch Crawley Town(3) play. Like most of the country, the BBC's Match of the Day on a Saturday night had become something of an institution in their family. Being able to continue that and giving the six kids the ability to chat any time they weren't in classes would certainly go a long way to maintaining the closeness the group had.

Dudley could see he was finally getting through to his worried mum, he hated to see her like this so pushed on. "Mum, Harry and Hermione are my two best friends. They are also like my brother and sister, being apart for a few months at a time isn't going to change that. We've been inseparable for nearly ten years, none of us have any wish or intention to grow apart."

Lily couldn't help but hug her boy. "I have the two best sons in the whole world."

"Hey, don't forget to put Hermione in there somewhere."

This released more of Lily's apprehension so Dudley continued in the same vein. "You know Hermione is already thinking about university? That girl has it all mapped out already, the three of us sharing a flat while we attend our courses. She's even planned for

part-time jobs so we can stand on our own feet. Does that sound as if we're going to let anything part us?"

Lily had come in here with the intention of comforting her son, only to find he was the one doing the comforting. She thought there was at least one thing she could do to help keep his spirits up, and it was also time. "I don't think you'll need those part-time jobs son, you're old enough to be told this now. When your mother and father were killed, there was quite a bit of insurance money left to you. Your dad set it up in a trust fund that becomes available to you when you leave school."

Dudley didn't know how to feel or what to say about that, then it hit him. "Oh that means I'll be able to help Harry and Hermione out."

Lily was so proud of the way Dudley had grown up, he was always thinking of others before himself. "Dudley, you know what your dad's like."

Dudley got it at once. "He would have set funds up for all three of us! Do they know? Can I tell them?"

She could only smile and nod as Dudley gave her a quick peck on the cheek before shooting out the room to spread the good news. Lily couldn't help but think all four parents would be delighted if the three of them ended up at university together. She remembered Hermione asking her if it was possible to take a magical degree, or transfer to a muggle one with NEWTs. Lily had carefully explained the situation to her and it would appear the girl was already making plans. That both her boys would be included in those plans was a given.

Hermione's squeal of delight alerted Lily that all three kids now knew the secret. She wondered how long it would take Hermione to have her plans revised to take account of their new circumstances? On past form, not long at all. Dudley hadn't even asked what size his trust fund was, he just couldn't wait to tell his two best friends the good news.

-oOoOo-

September the first made its way around and the whole gang descended on Kings Cross. With it being Sunday, Dudley and Luna



were also there to see their friends leave for Hogwarts. It was an emotional trip for all the parents too.

Emma couldn't help but think how different things would be if they hadn't met Lily and Harry that Halloween. She and Dan would be standing here sending their little girl off alone to face the unknown, relying on the occasional letter home to keep them in touch. Instead they knew exactly what was waiting on her, including a few of the professors who were like family, and she was boarding the train with three of her best friends. They would also have Dudley staying with them to help cope with the missing children who had become such a major part of their life.

Little Jane Longbottom was in floods of tears at the sight of her big brother getting on the train without her.

Luna was also holding onto Dudley as she fought not to cry, they'd never had to say goodbye before. Dudley attempted to offer some comfort. "Never mind Luna, you'll be going with them next year."

"That doesn't make me feel any better, I'll need to leave you behind then. Why do things need to change? We've all been together forever."

"Luna, we've always known this was going to happen. I won't stop being here for you just because you go to Hogwarts."

"I've just thought of something, I'll need to spend my last year at Hogwarts on my own."

"Yeah but by that time you'll be head girl and so popular, you won't even miss us."

"Please don't ever think that Dudley, I'll always miss my friends."

She buried her face into his chest so he wouldn't see the tears she was shedding. Dudley looked away to avoid embarrassing Luna and noticed his mum was fighting the tears too. "Mum, you're going to be waiting on them at the other end when the train gets to Hogsmead."

"I know son, but you won't be there."

"Mum, I'm staying with Aunt Em and Uncle Dan and you'll be home on Friday. Luna's going to be staying tonight and we've both got St Andrews tomorrow. I'll be fine."

They were interrupted by a blond boy walking past, an old elf levitating his trunk behind him. "Come Kreature, one mustn't tarry about here. They're apparently letting anyone on to the platform now. The stench of muggles is really quite repulsive."

Luna stopped Dudley from reacting, whispering just loud enough so Draco could overhear. "Ignore him Dud. That must be that arrogant wanker Malfoy that Uncle Sirius told us about. He was right, what a tosser."

Draco was desperate to reply but his mother had now caught up with him, he had to behave himself. "Morning Sirius. On the train Draco, it will be leaving in a few moments. Remember and write."

The group's attention was then drawn to a tribe of redheads who appeared to be running even behind the fashionably late Malfoys. That didn't stop twin boys heading straight for their group.

"Mr Lupin, it's absolutely splendid to meet you, we just love your shop, Tomfoolery."

"Yes, we design and make our own pranks. They're not up to PMP standards but one day..."

Both boys were grabbed by their ears. "Fred, George, get on that train this instant. Stop bothering these good people."

Sirius had Joy in his arms and didn't even try to hide his laughter as the boys were frogmarched off. "Now you know why we made Remus the public face of Padfoot-Moony-Prancer. We don't work in Tomfoolery and don't get recognised in the street."

"You mean it wasn't because I'm the best looking marauder? You wound me Padfoot."

James was quickly shaking his head in answer. "Remus, you know if it was down to looks then I would be the public face of Prancer-Mooney-Padfoot. Isn't that right Lily love?"

"Oh and here was me thinking PMP stood for Prat-Moron-Plonker. Our kids are about to leave for one of the most important journeys of their lives, let's leave the board meetings until later."

The steam whistle resounded around platform nine and three quarters and they all waved madly at the carriage that was taking their four new first years to Hogwarts.

-oOoOo-

The four settled down as the train headed out of London, bound for Scotland.

"Harry, you know we'll keep in touch. Anyway, can you see Dudley leaving St Andrews without Luna? Never going to happen."

"You're right Hermione but it just feels so strange, this is the first time I can remember us ever being separated."

Susan agreed with Harry. "I'll miss them too. What's going to happen if we get sorted into different houses? I would hate it if we were reduced to seeing each other only at meals and sharing a few classes."

Hermione was the one who usually came up with a plan of action, she didn't disappoint. "I spoke to Uncle Remus about that, he told me you can influence the sorting hat. It will listen to what's most important to you. The most important thing for us is to be together. Susan will be the first to be sorted and then we all demand to be in the same house."

"Glad to know the Bones name is good for something, even if it's only alphabetical. No pressures on me then, choose the house for all of us and Luna next year."

Neville was smiling at Sue's pretend pout. "It's not that important Sue. Sorry Harry but I don't care if we're not in Gryffindor with Uncle James, as long as we're all in the same house that will do for me."

This set Hermione off into a bout of the giggles. "This is going to be so weird. Having to remember to call Uncle James, Aunt's Lily and Aurora by Professor."

"Hey, you think you lot got it bad? I've got to change from mum and dad to Professor Potter."

The four were all laughing as the compartment door opened and a set of twin boys entered.

"What do you think George, likely candidates?"

"Oh I would say so Fred. Four firsties acting as if they don't have a care in the world, could be the very people we're looking for."

"I'm Fred and he's George, we're the Weasley twins. The best pranksters in Hogwarts."

Harry could never resist a good prank, especially when it landed right in his lap. "Oh, we've heard about you two." Fred and George looked quite pleased until Harry continued. "My dad says you show some promise but are still rather amateurish and far too predictable."

Fred wasn't pleased. "And just who is this paragon of pranking you call dad?"

George had another thought. "You wouldn't happen to be Remus Lupin's son? We spotted him on the platform saying goodbye to someone and have been checking all the firsties."

The four burst into laughter again, Neville was almost doubled over. "Uncle Remus as your dad."

Susan couldn't help but add her tuppence worth. "Could have been worse, imagine Uncle Sirius?"

This had Harry springing to his godfather's defence. "Hey, leave my dogfather alone you guys."

Hermione backed him up. "Yeah, Padfoot makes a wonderful father. Just look at the way he dotes on Joy."

Susan was still sniggering at her friend. "Did you bring Paddy to Hogwarts?"

Hermione wasn't in the least perturbed, she rested her head on Harry's shoulder. "Of course I did, I'll need something to cuddle into when Harry's sleeping in the boys dorm."

The twins were left thinking they'd found the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow.

"Uncle Remus?"

"Padfoot?"

Both now invited themselves to sit with the firsties. "Tell us more?"

"Yeah, Remus Lupin and the Marauders are our biggest heroes."

Hermione was instantly on alert, you didn't grow up with three marauders without developing a healthy suspicious nature. "How do you two know about the marauders?"

With great reverence, Fred removed an old piece of parchment from his robes. "Boys and girls, I present to you the marauders. The greatest pranksters Hogwarts has ever seen."

Harry couldn't take his eyes off the old bit of parchment. "Well, you certainly got the last part right. That's the original marauders map, how did you get a hold of it?"

It was George's turn to be suspicious now. "How do you know about the marauders map, and what do you mean the original?"

Harry took his mirror from his pocket. "Bambi, I solemnly swear I'm up to no good."

Harry now had a twin looking over each shoulder as the writing familiar to the three of them appeared on the mirror.

Messer's Prancer, Moony and Padfoot welcome Bambi to the Marauders Map –Version Four

Harry then said 'expand' and the small mirror was suddenly about five times larger. The map that the twins had spent many an hour studying was now on the screen. When Harry began moving the

locations on the map simply by touching the screen, the twins were almost drooling.

"Mischief managed. Thumper, Ariel."

Two faces about the size of the original mirror soon appeared on the screen.

"Harry what's wrong? You've hardly been gone an hour, I can't believe Hermione would let you get into trouble already."

Another part of the screen blinked SW and Harry said 'Snow White' before Hermione's face appeared on the screen. "Thanks for that vote of confidence Dudley, hi Luna, is that ice cream I see?"

This had Dudley smiling. "I think mum was feeling guilty at leaving me in Crawley. Uncle Remus took us to Diagon Alley and Aunt Maia is picking us up when she finishes work to take us back to Hermione's. Of course we're in Fortescue's, first place we made for."

The twins were transfixed, another flicker of an L and Harry said 'Lady' before the other girl in the compartment appeared on the screen. The pranking possibilities of these things were just awesome.

"Hey Dudley, don't forget to tape Neighbours. I can't wait to find out what happens next."

"Yea sure Susan, though how you can watch that rubbish is beyond me."

"Just because Charlene left, all you guys now think its rubbish."

The final part of Harry's screen flickered with a red B and Harry said 'Baloo' as the other boy's face appeared. "Take Kylie Minogue out the show and there's no reason left to watch it."

As Harry was sitting beside Hermione and Dudley was next to Luna, Neville found no backers for his views at the moment.

Dudley quickly changed the subject, reaffirming the universal rule. If in doubt around girls, guys cover by talking about sport. "Hey guys, Uncle Remus came up with a cracking new invention. It's a pair of

omnioculars that appear like an ordinary pair of glasses. I'll be able to record some of the Crawley City games and we'll be able to watch it before match of the day."

Harry was well pleased. "Dudley, that's fantastic. We'll all talk tonight after we're sorted."

Dudley was nodding into his mirror. "Ok you guys, good luck with all staying together."

Luna wanted the final word. "Yeah, pick a good house because I'll be in it next year."

They all signed off as mirrors were put back into pockets. The twins' eyeballs were popping out their heads. "As you can see gentlemen, the marauders have come a long way since leaving Hogwarts. The stuff they come up with now is out of this world."

Hermione readily agreed with Harry. "They watch how trends develop in the muggle world and then attempt magical solutions. We get to be the ginny pigs but it has its benefits." Hermione tapped the pocket she'd just placed her mirror into.

George couldn't help his outburst. "Can you lot adopt us?"

Fred was nodding eagerly. "Does that mean Remus Lupin is a marauder? Who were the other three?"

You could have been forgiven for thinking a dementor had entered the compartment, the atmosphere was certainly now cold enough. Harry was really the only one who could answer that. "There are only three marauders. Wormtail, aka Peter Pettigrew doesn't get mentioned in our house. He tried to get us all murdered when I was a baby."

It was hard to hear that someone you'd idolised was a traitorous bastard, Fred was now frightened of the next answer but just had to ask. "What happened to Prongs?"

Harry couldn't help but smile at that, Hermione had cuddled into his side at the mention of Wormtail. He put his arm around her and squeezed her shoulder in appreciation. "A certain Miss Hermione Granger couldn't tell the difference between a stag and a reindeer."

"Hey, I was two at the time!"

"In her defence, I will say that's probably the last time she was wrong about something." This earned Harry a hug and a heart-stopping smile from the girl in question. "Anyway, Messer's Padfoot, Moony and my mum thought this was bloody hilarious. So Prongs became Prancer."

Fred was pleased that nothing bad had happened to Prongs but the answer threw up another question. "What did your mum have to do with it?"

"Well, since she's his wife, quite a lot. My dad is Professor Potter, also known as Prancer while Padfoot is my godfather, Sirius Black. Both he and Moony are honorary uncles to all of us, Moony is of course Remus Lupin."

"Fred, we're amongst pranking royalty here. Who would have thought Professor Potter was a marauder?"

"Come to think of it George, we've never been able to prank either of the Potters."

Harry was now laughing, the bad moment from earlier now behind them. "How do you think we feel. I'm Harry Potter, this is Hermione whose parents are like her, scarily smart. Neville Longbottom, his mum and dad just happen to be two of the best aurors in the country while Susan Bones here lives with her aunt. Madam Amelia Bones, Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, we couldn't pull any pranks while growing up. Now we get to Hogwarts to find both my parents and Aunt Aurora here as professors, we just can't seem to catch a break."

The compartment door opened again to reveal another redhead standing there, this one wore a prefects badge though. "Fred and George, I hope you're not frightening these first years with outlandish Hogwarts tales."

"Percy, trust us, McGonagall couldn't frighten these guys."



Susan had mischief in her eyes as she chipped a bit of misinformation into the conversation. "Why would Aunt Minnie be scary? She's a pussy cat."

The stares she got from the three redheads was worth the joke, all she needed now was for one of them to call McGonagall 'Minnie' to her face. Surely no one was that stupid?

"Well, if you two want to sit with first years, can I suggest spending some time with Ron? I need to patrol the train."

"Aw Percy, he's a whining little git."

"You know Fred's right, no way are we being saddled with him all the way to Hogwarts."

"He might be a whining little git, but he's our whining little git. I would hate for mum to hear that you two left him alone all the way to Scotland."

"Ok Percy, we'll take a turn babysitting. Where is he?"

"He's about three carriages behind this one, see you all later."

Fred was shaking his head as his elder brother left. "We need to go guys, Ronald is our little brother and mum would kill us if we don't keep an eye on him."

"Yeah and Percy the prefect wouldn't hesitate to use his new owl to let her know."

"Hope you guys are all in Gryffindor. Professor Quirrell is pretty harmless and we get away with murder."

Hermione couldn't hide her smirk. "He left, should we tell them who the new head of Gryffindor is, or let them find out at the feast?"

Harry decided to put them out of their misery, just in case they planned something for the feast. "My dad is the new head of Gryffindor."

All the new first years were sniggering at the twins' identical shocked expressions, Susan was the one to deliver the final devastating blow. "Oh, and he has a mirror like ours, since he helped invent them."

George could see their pranking career slipping down the toilet, what was the point of attempting pranks if you always get caught? It hardly enhanced your reputation as pranksters.

Fred had one final question. "Are you lot marauders? Is that why you had the names in the mirrors?"

Hermione actually harrumphed. "No, they gave us those stupid names and all the cool stuff doesn't work if we don't use them. The mirrors are tied to our voices so, unlike the original map, knowing the password won't help if someone else gets a hold of it. The marauders have all become hooked on Disney movies while we were growing up, hence the stupid names."

Fred could see an obvious fault in that method. "Why not tie the mirrors into your magical signature, surely that would be better?"

Harry's answer left no room for further questions on the subject. "Not everyone has a magical signature."

George hadn't understood a lot of what had been said here today and didn't get Hermione's last reference either. "What's a Disney movie?"

Neville's entire face lit up. "Now here's an opportunity, Dudley could beam the Jungle Book right into Hogwarts."

The thought of a load of witches and wizards walking about humming 'I want to be like you' cracked the four youngsters up, the twins left the four firsties the way they found them, laughing. Hogwarts was certainly going to be interesting this year. None of them knew the surprise that was waiting in the castle for them.

A/N Thanks for reading

I don't usually do this but there were a few 'cultural' references put into this chapter that people from outside Britain might struggle with.

(1) Neighbours was/is an Australian soap that was inexplicably and massively popular with British youngsters around this time.

(2) The BBC's Match of the Day is a football show that has become a well-loved British institution, being broadcast for well over forty years.

(3) Congratulations to Crawley Town FC, they won their championship this season and now move up a division.

(4) There was a 4? Just to clear something up. Tomfoolery is the name of the shop while MPM is the company name and the brand the products are sold under.

## Chapter 10

When Harry, Hermione, Susan and Neville left the train at Hogsmead, Hagrid's instantly recognisable figure was standing with a lantern and calling for all first years to follow him. The four to a boat rule suited the friends just fine as they began the final stage of their journey to Hogwarts.

Some of the older students had obviously been frightening the newbies with wholly horrific and entirely inaccurate tales of how they would be lucky to all make the castle alive. Apparently the giant squid demanded a sacrifice every year for allowing them passage across the Black Lake, no one had yet unravelled how the giant creature made its seemingly random choice. Once the castle was in view, their apprehension shifted to the even more horrific and downright ludicrous methods that they would be forced to experience when being sorted into houses.

To the four, these conversations were a lot more palatable than the hatred the blond prick had been attempting to pollute the train with. Malfoy had reacted like a religious zealot, dropped into the middle of a sea of unbelievers. He just couldn't wait to begin converting everyone to the true faith, his own pureblood philosophy of course. On most occasions, his ramblings had fallen on deaf ears but more than one eyebrow had been raised in curiosity.

The pounce had gotten short shrift in their carriage. Thanks to this vile brand of bigotry, Susan and Dudley had both lost their parents while the Potters and Longbottoms narrowly escaped the same fate. That Malfoy escaped their carriage uncursed and unscathed was solely due to the four holding their tempers.

Hagrid was now the centre of attention as the firsties attempted to discover just what the sorting entailed, the Hogwarts gamekeeper though was sworn to secrecy on this issue. Telling them that all they needed to do was wear some old hat probably wouldn't have been believed anyway.

After leaving the boats and entering the castle proper, they were greeted by the Deputy Headmaster, Professor Flitwick. He gave a brief explanation of the personal attributes each of the four houses was looking for before leaving to see if the great hall was ready for them.

The diminutive professor had no sooner departed than the whining voice the four friends had already come to loathe started spouting forth his particular brand of poison again.

"Honestly, as if the uneducated oaf who brought us here in those ridiculous boats wasn't bad enough, we have to put up with that creature as a deputy headmaster. This place has certainly let the standards slip. This would never have been allowed if my father was still on the Hogwarts board of governors."

Neville had all he could stand of this idiot. He decided to say something now before the stupid arse started mouthing about those unworthy to be taught magic and Harry dealt with him. "Oh and just why did this great wizard you call father decide he no longer wished to serve on the school board? Could it possibly have something to do with all the travelling involved in going between Azkaban and Hogwarts? Right enough, Azkaban prison tends not to hand out weekend passes to convicted death eaters."

Draco had been raised on stories on how great a wizard his father was, a wizard who was willing to go to prison to stand up for his beliefs. As his son, Draco wasn't about to stand here and listen to his father's great name being tarnished. "Yes my father was wrongfully placed in prison but he'll be getting out soon. Then we'll see what happens, standards will certainly improve when all the political prisoners get released."

Susan exploded at that lie. "Political prisoners? Where did you hear shite like that? Death eaters were nothing more than cowardly murdering bastards. My parents were amongst the many they killed, and the Bones name is far older and more prevalent in our society than yours ever will be."

Neville and Hermione comforted their friend. If Susan lost her temper here, Malfoy would be changing his name to mincemeat. Harry had known it would only be a matter of time before one of them would have to stand up to Malfoy, he just thought it would take longer than this. It was also hard to miss that the rest of the first years were now focused on this issue, it was time to destroy Malfoy before anyone thought to take him seriously.

"Malfoy, when your old man gets out of prison, your family are then homeless. Sirius refuses to let the death eater set foot in a Black property, and you are only here because Sirius also paid for your tuition. Malfoy Manor is long gone as it, and most of your family fortune, was impounded by the ministry."

Susan had her temper back under control but that didn't mean she was finished with Malfoy, it was time to verbally put the boot in. "The manor was stripped of anything worthwhile and then flattened. The land was worth a lot more than some stupid attempt at impressing the neighbours with a large house. There are almost seven hundred houses built there now, all bought and occupied by people without magic."

Draco's temper tantrum reminded them of little Jane Longbottom when she couldn't get her own way. "You're nothing but a bunch of liars!"

Harry shook his head in answer. "Nope, Dad and Uncle Sirius listened to Uncle Dan. They sold the land to a non-magical developer, and made an absolute fortune on the deal too."

The young blond boy was struggling to understand this concept. "But that was our house."

Susan could feel no sympathy for him, even if he was almost in tears. "Was is the important word there, the ministry sold it off as part of your parents punishment for their crimes."

Draco never got to say any more as Flitwick returned, leading them in to be sorted. He was fuming but still knew better than to continue this argument when a professor was present.

On entering the great hall, the Oh's and ah's of the new first year's were peppered by four different versions of 'what the ...'.

Harry, Hermione, Neville and Susan had expected a pair of Potters and a female Black to be sitting at the staff table, the additional two Blacks confused them. Sirius was sitting there, bouncing Joy on his knee while smiling down at their obvious bemusement. They had no time to consider this development as the sorting hat began what could be grudgingly be referred to as a song, only if you were tone deaf though.

Susan knew she would be one of the first students sorted and again felt her friends rally around in support. "Hey Sue, don't worry about it. We're the ones left to fight with the hat to get in the same house."

"Thanks Nev, you really know how to cheer a girl up. Wish me luck guys." As Hannah Abbot headed for the Hufflepuff table, Susan Bones was called forward to be sorted.

She marched straight to the stool, sat and placed the hat on her head. Even seated, Susan was probably too tall for the charms professor to reach up to her head with the sorting hat.

"Mmm, very interesting and most unusual. From an old pureblood family yet you could easily pass as a muggle if you wished to, there's something I don't see too often. Smart too, but I don't think Ravenclaw would suit you. Yes you certainly love to learn but there has to be a purpose to that knowledge, not just to know facts others don't."

Susan was blushing as the hat continued, she was so glad no one else could hear this.

"Brave enough for Gryffindor but again not the best fit for you my dear. Also loyal as any Hufflepuff but once more that's not what defines you. It's your ambition and drive that makes you who you are Miss Bones, your vision of what you want our society to become is something I can only hope you achieve. Ambition like that leaves me only one choice."

Her friends were all on tenterhooks before the hat shouted "Slytherin".

As Susan made her way to the Slytherin table, Harry glanced toward the staff table and was even more confused by what he saw there. Sirius was on his feet and literally dancing with Joy in his arms, not the reaction he would have expected.

Susan sat at a table that no member of her family had ever belonged to before, she was aware of her new house's rather dark reputation and now was concerned for her friends.

By the time Hermione's turn came, she was as prepared as she could be. With the determination she was renowned for, the young witch boldly stepped forward and soon had the hat on her head. "Slytherin please."

The hat almost chuckled. "Young lady, I don't know what you've been told but that's not how things work here. I'm the sorting hat and you are the student."

"Oh I know that sir, I'm the student you were just about to place in Slytherin."

The hat tried to reason with the girl. "Miss Granger, no muggleborn student has ever been sorted into Slytherin..."

"Oh brilliant, setting a record on my first day here. Surely that makes me ambitious enough for Slytherin? I know exactly what I want and I'm prepared to do whatever I need to get it, that must say Slytherin to you?"

"Wouldn't you prefer Ravenclaw?"

"No thank you sir, Slytherin for me."

"Ah, the mystery of how Miss Bones knows so much about muggles is explained. I also now understand how someone who is supposed to have no knowledge of our world can sit there and demand to be sorted into Slytherin. I wouldn't normally do this but some traditions deserve to be broken, and Miss Bones will need all the help she can get to achieve her goals. The best of luck Miss Granger."

At the announcement of Slytherin, Susan was standing with unshed tears in her eyes as Hermione ran into her waiting arms. Hermione was all smiles as she hugged her friend and they waited on the boys, Hogwarts wouldn't survive them getting sorted anywhere else but Slytherin.

Draco was livid, Granger clearly wasn't the right sort yet the stupid hat had placed her in Slytherin. He silently swore to make her life hell once he was sorted there.



Neville was next of the friends to be sorted. He followed the same procedure as Hermione and asked for Slytherin the instant the hat was on his head.

"Mr Longbottom, you can't be serious? You are the quintessential Gryffindor, that would be a far better fit."

"No thanks, I'm a Slytherin."

"Oh not another one, pureblood who knows more about muggles than the professor who teaches the subject. Just because you've been raised alongside Miss Granger and Miss Bones doesn't mean you need to be in the same house."

"My task at Hogwarts is to reach my full potential. To do that, I need my friends by my side. Slytherin for me please."

The hat grumbled about children today not knowing their place, but conceded at least they had still been taught manners. "Slytherin."

Seconds later, the first Longbottom sorted into Slytherin was being hugged by two girls.

When Draco sat and placed the hat on his head, the first thing he did was start berating the ancient artefact for placing a mudblood in Slytherin.

This proved a step too far for the beleaguered hat. "Mr Malfoy, I'll have you know that where I place any student, apart from you, is none of your concern."

A quick scan of the boy told the sorting hat many things, including that the lad was not the sharpest tool in the box. A Ravenclaw he was not. He expected Slytherin simply because he'd been given everything he'd ever asked for, to grant his wish would just encourage the spoilt brat further. The Gryffindors would eat him alive so that just left one option. This was reinforced by a conversation from the express that stood out in the boy's mind for the sorting hat to read, 'I think I would rather go home than be in Hufflepuff'. If any child needed to learn the value of hard work, it was this one. Besides, Hogwarts might get lucky and he would actually carry out his idle threat. "Hufflepuff."

Draco was not amused, he was raging. "What? You sort a mudblood into Slytherin and then try to put me in the house of the duffers? This hat is just a useless old piece of junk, I demand to be sorted properly. Everyone knows Malfoys belong in Slytherin."

Puffs were usually slow to anger but not tonight, Slytherins were angry at this little prick trying to drag them into this argument. The Ravenclaws were upset at his lack of respect and the Gryffindors were just angry, how could anyone prefer being a snake to a puff? The staff were also very annoyed with this outburst. Draco Malfoy had managed to upset the entire hall on his first night, quite the achievement.

Filius didn't get a chance to reprimand the boy as Minerva beat him to it. "Mr Malfoy, you just earned yourself a weeks worth of detentions with me, and a letter home to your mother for your disgusting language. Use that word again and you'll be facing a suspension. I've never heard a Hufflepuff use that word before..."

Malfoy was too self-centred to see he was in deep trouble here, he took the headmistresses words as proof-positive that his sorting was wrong. "That's exactly what I've been saying. I belong in Slytherin, the home of the purebloods."

Pomona was glaring at her new student, an expression rarely seen from the jovial head of Hufflepuff. "Mr Malfoy, you have been sorted so kindly make your way to the correct table. After you've finished your detentions with the headmistress, you'll have another week's worth with me. I'm Professor Sprout, the head duffer!"

Draco was forced to make his way over to a table when he'd just insulted everyone sitting there. The new Hufflepuff first years made sure to leave him enough room so they wouldn't actually have to sit beside him. Draco found himself sitting alone, something he was actually grateful for.

Things had barely settled down when Harry sat on the stool and asked the hat for Slytherin.

"Mr Potter, this is madness. You're a born Gryffindor and your father is currently head of that house, why would you want to be in Gryffindor?"

After the Malfoy fiasco, Harry decided to be totally honest with the hat. "Hogwarts has already separated me from Dudley, nothing will keep me from Hermione."

The hat now saw the bond between these children, but especially the one between Miss Granger and Mr Potter. They simply had to be in the same house. "Not Gryffindor, then better be Slytherin."

His three friends already at the Slytherin table were cheering loudly while Harry noticed Sirius with a big grin on his face as he taught Joy how to clap her hands. This had been a weird evening and it wasn't over yet.

There was more commotion when the hat decided another student would benefit from learning the value of hard work. Ronald Weasley's loud declaration that he wasn't a duffer also earned him a week's worth of detentions with the now totally pissed-off head duffer.

Minerva was relieved when the Zabini lad was walking in the direction of the Slytherin table and the sorting was over for the year. She quickly ran through a short welcoming speech before getting around to the staff changes for the year. "We have two new heads of house this term. Professor Quirrell has taken a sabbatical from teaching in order to travel, we wish him well. Professor James Potter will now be teaching transfiguration full time and is also the new Head of Gryffindor."

This drew a genuine round of applause from the Gryffindor table, and strangely four Slytherin first years.

"Professor Slughorn is working toward his eventual retirement and stepping down from his head of house duties. First and second years will now be taught both potions and charms from Professor Lilly Potter"

This drew more applause, both Professor Potters were popular in the castle.

"Our new defence against the dark arts teacher is Professor Sirius Black, who will also take over as Head of Slytherin."

Four new Slytherins were ecstatic at this news. They now personally knew their teachers of astronomy, transfiguration, defence, potions and charms, with Sirius being their head of house. All four were in great moods as the headmistress announced the start of the feast. Their new yearmates though were full of questions, Millicent Bulstrode waded right in. she was used to her rather large size intimidating others, she was about to discover it didn't work with this group.

"Granger? I don't recall that name as a wizarding family?"

Hermione's answer was pleasant enough but the Slytherins could hear the steel in her voice. "Oh that would be because I'm the first magical child in our family. Thankfully I had my friends to keep me right and teach me all about magic."

Susan also knew exactly what their large housemate was up to and wanted to shove a big stick through the girl's front wheel before she built up any momentum. "Yeah right, when was the last time any of us were able to teach you anything? This girl here is a certifiable genius, she's been top of every class since we were five."

This brought up more questions than it answered for the Slytherins but Neville interrupted them. "I just spotted Uncle James hand a bag of gold over to Uncle Sirius, any ideas?"

Hermione was shaking her head. "You know it will be some stupid bet, I think they just pass the same bag of gold between them."

Her comments got the other three laughing, they'd all heard some of the silly things the marauders had bet on over the years as they were growing up. The gold wasn't nearly as important as the kudos gained from winning. The bag could be full of dungbombs for all anyone knew, they'd never seen any of them opening it.

Milly wasn't about to be deflected from her initial question though. Just because she was a little more subtle than that prick Malfoy didn't mean she wasn't concerned about the blood issue. "If you're a muggleborn, why did the hat place you in Slytherin?"

"That's easy, I asked it to."

This discussion was drawing attention from more Slytherins than just the first years so Hermione continued. "We all decided before getting on the express we would be in the same house. We've all been raised and schooled together for most of our lives, Hogwarts wasn't about to separate us. Hearing that Uncle Sirius is our head of house is just brilliant, though I'll bet he rubs Uncle James' nose in it."

Susan was laughing at the certainty of that action. "Yeah, until Aunt Lily and Aunt Aurora slap them on the back of the head. I can't believe they're teaching us five of our classes, wait until we tell Dad and Luna that news."

Hermione could think of a few other people who would be pleased. "Mum and dad will be delighted too."

Vincent Crabbe had been watching this like a tennis match as the conversation was batted between the girls. His problems were, not only did he not know the current score, he had no idea what game was being played here.

"Who are all these uncles and aunts?"

The other three knew Hermione just loved explaining things so left her to it. "Uncle James and Aunt Lily are Harry's parents and the Potters, our potions, charms and transfiguration professors. Uncle Sirius and Aunt Aurora are the Blacks, defence, astronomy and also our head of house. We've known Aunt Aurora since we were about five but we've known the rest since we were tiny, I met Harry, Neville and Susan when I was two."

Vincent wanted to make sure he had his facts right. "So you know nearly all our teachers and are a genius?"

Hermione blushed at that. "I don't know about the genius part but yes to the rest."

Harry's hand instantly found hers. "Trust us, she is. The House Cup is as good as Slytherin's, which will really upset my dad. Well Sirius bragging about it for the entire year will probably upset him more."

This brought a big smile to Vincent's face. "That's just brilliant, welcome to Slytherin Miss Granger."

With that, any animosity Milly had tried to generate toward Hermione vanished like free whisky at a Scottish wedding. Even the large girl could see that having these four in Slytherin would be a tremendous asset to their house. To a real Slytherin, having an advantage was everything.

Over the four house tables, introductions were made and stories were told as the new first years got to know the people they would be spending most of the next seven years with. The only place this didn't happen was the house that prided itself on unity. A redhead and a blond sat at the end of the Hufflepuff table in silence. They had no intention of speaking with each other and none of the other first years would speak to them. Since Ron's appetite wasn't affected by his sorting, his refusal to talk to Draco was the first break the Malfoy boy had caught since boarding the express.

At the staff table, Sirius was enjoying lording it over James. All had been sure the four kids would end up in the same house but for that house to be Slytherin certainly wasn't expected. "I need to speak to my Quidditch captain, he needs to make sure our new first years are included in any team trials. I've a sneaky suspicion he just might find some exceptional talent there."

Minerva's ears picked up at the mention of her favourite sport. "Am I to understand that some of our new first years have the potential to make the house Quidditch teams?"

"Minerva, four of my new first years would soar into any of the house teams. They're fast, fearless and have played together for years. They even have their own top of the range brooms at home."

While Minerva would probably always favour her old house, she just loved to see a good game of Quidditch. "Well, you certainly have my permission to play them if they make the house team."

As Sirius struggled to contain his exuberance, James was left groaning and wondering what went wrong. Something surely must be wrong when Slytherin gets three times the number of new first year that Gryffindor received. James realised though he wouldn't be complaining at only getting four first years if he'd gotten the four he wanted. Minerva had warned them both not to let their competitiveness with each other spill over into their houses.

Slytherin and Gryffindor didn't need any more edge to their ages old rivalry.

That a Potter, Longbottom, Bones and first generation witch could be sorted into Slytherin was an indictment to the progress their society had made in the years since Voldemort was destroyed. Slytherin house was no longer the cesspit of pureblood bigotry that it had been when they attended Hogwarts. A muggleborn would have been murdered before completing their first week. Horace had done a good job of moving the house away from that stance. Then again, if there was one thing old Sluggy was good at, it was spotting a popular trend and getting in on it early. Sirius would never have taken the post otherwise. Even so, James would still have been really worried for Hermione if her head of house wasn't Sirius.

Sirius' master plan for this year was simplicity itself. Win both the Quidditch and house cups but do so fairly. Let the students see that Slytherin was a house they could be rightly proud of. The sorting hat had just handed him a massive advantage tonight. A muggleborn witch in Slytherin, his mother would be turning in her grave.

-oOoOo-

Hermione found her belongings had been placed at a four-poster bed between Pansy's and Susan's, they had Tracy, Daphne and Millicent across from them. Hermione knew Dudley and Luna would be desperate to hear from them so sat on her new bed and took out her mirror. "Snow White for Thumper and Ariel – expand."

The other four girls were arranging their belongings while attempting to peek at what was going on, especially when Susan repeated the process. Both girls were clearly talking to other people and it was Pansy whose curiosity got the better of her first.

The dark haired girl peered over Hermione's shoulder and spied five other faces appearing on what she'd assumed was a simple mirror. "Hermione, how is this possible?"

"Oh, these are PMP prototypes that we're product testing. Remus hopes to have them on sale by next year at the latest. Neville, Susan, and Harry you know, the other two are our friends Dudley and Luna."

Pansy was even more confused with that answer. "'Didn't you say earlier that these two were somewhere outside London and that the boy was a muggle?'"

"They're in my house in Crawley and Dudley isn't magical, but I don't see your problem?"

Millicent had given up all pretence that she wasn't dying to know what these things were. She was now leaning over Hermione's other shoulder while Tracy and Daphne had taken up the same positions around Susan.

The large Slytherin girl was also still having trouble with this. "How can a muggle use a magical device? Isn't that against the statue of secrecy?"

"Dudley stays with Harry and I, he's currently living with my parents since his are the Potters and they're now here full time."

Any more explanations from Hermione were cut off as her parents appeared in Dudley's mirror. The other four Slytherin girls were left to watch in disbelief as all these people chatted with each other, despite some of them being hundreds of miles away from Hogwarts.

The same scenario was also taking place in the first year Slytherin boy's dorm. Greg, Vincent, Theo and Blaise were every bit as impressed as their female counterparts. All eight new Slytherins were looking at the item that had just shot straight to the top of their Christmas wish lists.

When a green 'P' appeared in the last space of the mirror, the watchers were amazed to discover that 'Padfoot' was none other than their head of house, Professor Black.

"Guys, you've all got a busy day tomorrow, don't stay up half the night chatting. I'm assuming there are others now listening in so I'll just welcome everyone to Slytherin House, I'll meet you all in the common room before breakfast tomorrow. Night all."

This display ended any and all objections Millicent may have had over Granger's blood status. She had instantaneous access to their head of house and called the man uncle. It was also obvious that none of the others in their year had a problem with the girl.



After watching what an arse Malfoy had made of himself earlier, there really wasn't a choice left to make. Millicent was a Slytherin through and through, she wasn't about to buck public opinion, or go after someone so clearly well connected, over a simple thing like blood prejudice. She had to spend the next seven years with these people, she had no intention of making enemies. A happy house would be a productive house and Millicent knew she needed the best education she could get.

There were also eyebrows raised when Hermione placed Paddy on her bed, Susan smiled at her friend and answered the unasked question. "Hermione here needs Paddy to cuddle into when she hasn't got her Harry."

Hermione returned a sad little smile. "I've just realised something, this is the furthest Harry and I have ever been apart at night."

Daphne couldn't let that one slip by. "You sleep with Harry?"

"Since we were babies. We always have at least adjoining rooms, even when we go abroad on holiday."

Tracy's jaw was hanging open at this. "What does your mum say about this?"

"Oh Harry has the room next to mine in my house too. Mum and dad love him nearly as much as I do."

Milly took on the job of asking the most obvious question. "Is Harry your boyfriend?"

Susan was now giggling. "Harry is her best friend and sorry girls, Luna and I have already claimed the bridesmaid spots."

The other four girls were now giggling along until they noticed Hermione's reaction to Susan's claim. She didn't make any attempt to deny it, rather cuddled into her toy dog with a wistful grin playing on her lips.

-oOoOo-

Albus Dumbledore was standing at the edge of the forbidden forest and there was also a wistful smile escaping from his beard. He'd gotten close enough earlier to make sure the Potter boy had indeed entered Hogwarts. Since Harry was the spitting image of his father, there was no room for any doubt as Albus had seen the boy with his own eyes. If he was not mistaken, the Longbottom lad was in the same boat. This would be a target that was just too tempting for Voldemort not to attack.

He would have to be vigilant now, there could be no room for error here. Voldemort was sure to strike during the hours of darkness so Albus would have to keep a close watch on Gryffindor tower. His entire future depended on defeating Voldemort and saving the boy, failure was not an option.

-oOoOo-

Justin was wondering if he'd ruined his entire future by attending Hogwarts. His parents had him down for Eton and he was the one who had chosen the magical option. Now he found himself sharing a dorm with a boy who thought that Justin Finch-Fletchley should have been drowned at birth, and another whose manners would put a pig to shame. That this hog also snored louder than any pig could snort just added to his nightmare.

Thank goodness for Ernie and Hannah. Without them, Justin would probably already be writing home so he could leave Hogwarts. He was heartened by the attitude of the Second year girls who offered to let Hannah bunk with them, since she was the only first year girl sorted into Hufflepuff.

An older boy called Cedric had also taken him and Ernie aside to say that Hufflepuff was a very friendly place, and not to judge them all on the example of people like Malfoy and Weasley. Justin gave serious thought to those words and decided to give himself a fair crack at the whip before asking to leave. He also knew he wouldn't be sitting anywhere near Weasley anytime there was food involved, a letter home for a set of ear plugs wouldn't go amiss either.

-oOoOo-

Hermione had tossed and turned all night, at five a.m. she submitted to the inevitable and decided to get up and face the day. As she

quietly got ready, the thought that she would see Harry soon had a smile on her face. She made her way to the common room and found she wasn't alone in struggling to sleep, Harry rose from the couch and Hermione rushed into his open arms.

Sirius found them, snuggling into each other asleep on a couch, when he entered the Slytherin common room to greet his new first years. Neville and Susan were ensuring that they weren't woken and assuring anyone who asked that this was perfectly normal behaviour for them.

The marauder could only smile as he very gently nudged them awake, he learned the hard way not to prank one of them when they were holding the other. They were about four when Sirius had thought it would be fun to wake them by spraying some water on them, he'd been magically blasted clean across the room.

Harry assumed Hermione was being attacked and acted accordingly and instantly, his snuggle partner had done the exact same thing. Lily had mended his injuries before laying into him something fierce while Emma calmed the two kids who were distraught at hurting their uncle Padfoot. Sirius had learned his lesson well and could only grin when they woke and noticed they were the centre of attention. They quickly stood but Harry never released Hermione's hand, Sirius was pretty sure you would struggle to slip a sheet of parchment between the two the entire day.

Lily and James had been concerned that the two would have trouble not being able to hold each other if they had a bad or big day, so much so that they had an extra bedroom in their Hogwarts apartment. They hadn't told the kids about it yet but asked Sirius to keep an eye on the situation in case it was needed. He would monitor the pair closely but was pretty sure the kids would be staying at the Potters for Hermione's birthday, anything else would be cruel to them. The adults were all aware of the bond that existed between Harry and Hermione, all were expecting it to one day lead to marriage. Any other outcome was simply unthinkable.

A/N Thanks for reading.

## Chapter 11

Sirius had ensured he made the Slytherin Common room early enough to catch his new students before they headed off to breakfast. There were some things he wanted to say to his house before the rumour mill took over.

"Good morning everyone, I just wanted to take this opportunity to introduce myself to you before we start classes. I am Lord Sirius Orion Black and most of you will already know my wife, as Lady Black is your Astronomy Professor. I will be teaching you defence against the dark arts and am well qualified in this field, I served as an auror before leaving the ministry to set up PMP with my friends. I was also a Gryffindor when I attended Hogwarts as a student but please don't hold that against me."

It didn't take a genius to see from the glances he was receiving that his last piece of information was already known to some. This was his main reason for holding an impromptu meet and greet this morning, there were things he wanted to say upfront.

"Slytherin house from that time bears no resemblance whatsoever to what I see before me here today, people who don't learn from past mistakes are destined to repeat them. Slytherins are noted for their cunning, guile and ambition, I see nothing wrong with possessing these qualities. My ambition for this house is to see both the Quidditch and House Cups resting in my office at the end of term. This is especially true since one of my best friends is currently the head of Gryffindor."

For some reason this drew everyone's attention to Harry. He just laughed along with his friends, all four knowing the friendly rivalry that existed between the marauders.

"As I said, there is nothing wrong in having ambition. Cunning and guile are also admirable traits to possess, there is something eminently satisfying about outsmarting your opponents. Lying, cheating and sabotaging those same opponents is not something I want this house to be associated with, nor will I tolerate. I want the entire school to know we achieved our goals purely on merit. I want them all to be forced to concede that Slytherin House is simply the best house in Hogwarts."

This drew roaring cheers from the students as Sirius dismissed them off to breakfast. He held the first years back and told Marcus Flint he wanted a word with him later. Sirius then began handing the first years their timetables.

"Since this year's sorting was so skewed in favour of Slytherin and Ravenclaw, the first year timetable had to be amended last night. With the twelve of you, ten Ravenclaws, five Hufflepuffs and only four Gryffindors, this is the smallest intake of first years into Hogwarts in decades. Due to that fact, most of your classes will be undertaken as one group, Potions you will share with Hufflepuff while Herbology is now with the Gryffindors."

They were all studying their new timetables intently as Sirius gave his students more information on them.

"You will notice that you have Wednesday afternoon's and Thursday Morning's off. This is due to the fact that your astronomy class takes place at midnight on Wednesday. Now, since your first class is with me, I'll collect you all after breakfast. I won't have my house turning up late to their first class because they couldn't find it, losing Slytherin house points will see me demanding an explanation from the individual involved."

Sirius led the excited bunch through the still confusing array of corridors toward the great hall.

Pansy watched the young couple walking beside their head of house, still holding hands. Next to her walked the epitome of a light family wearing the green trimmed robes of Slytherin house. At the moment Pansy had a lot more questions than answers, it was time to try and change that. "Susan, if those two need to be so close, what would have happened if they had been placed in different houses?"

Susan could see the girl was struggling to understand so was as honest as she could be. "Hogwarts would have lost at least two students as they returned to Crawley and went back to St Andrews school. They would just have reversed their teaching schedule."

This didn't help Pansy any so Susan explained further. "As we told you, the six of us attended primary school before coming to Hogwarts, Luna and Dudley still do. Harry and Hermione intend to

continue with their ordinary education in their spare time and holidays, they and Dudley intend to attend a university after finishing here. They would have just swapped and studied their magical subjects in their spare time. With four Hogwarts professors available to them, I don't think they would have any problems with the curriculum."

Susan ran her thoughts through to their natural conclusion before saying the next bit. "Hogwarts would probably have lost four professors as well. Aunt Lily was torn about coming here full time while the Potters and Blacks aren't exactly hurting for money. They were already very wealthy before PMP made them another fortune. Without Harry and Hermione here, they would probably have stayed at home and continued our magical education there."

Pansy didn't miss the implications on the way Susan used 'our', she got the distinct impression Susan and Neville would have followed their friends back to this Crawley place. "Well then, we should just be glad Harry and Hermione were both sorted into Slytherin."

Susan didn't let Pansy see the smirk that was dying to break out on her face, that wouldn't have been the Slytherin thing to do.

Sirius took a moment to have a quiet word with his godson as they rounded another corner. "Did either of you get any sleep last night?"

"We managed a good hour on the sofa before you woke us. If we can't sleep, the mirrors can be used to arrange for us to meet in the common room. That sofa was quite comfortable."

Sirius had no intention of hiding his teasing smile. "I don't think it was the sofa that made you so comfortable."

Harry was denied a chance to answer as they were now at the great hall and Sirius was busy handing out timetables to the rest of Slytherin.

Justin had received his timetable from Professor Sprout and was studying it intently, keenly anticipating his first lesson at Hogwarts, defence with Professor Black. The only fly in the ointment was that he had no idea where that classroom was located. Reckoning that his Slytherin counterparts would be more likely to know that information, the naive Hufflepuff decided to ask. Turning around until

he was facing the Slytherin table, Justin unknowingly committed a Hogwarts faux pas and left himself wide open for an embarrassing rebuttal.

"Excuse me chaps, we appear to be sharing our first lesson together. You wouldn't happen to know where the defence classroom is, would you?"

Greg was busily working out which of his answers would be the more sarcastic when Neville beat him to it.

"Sorry we don't, but Professor Black is collecting us outside the great hall after breakfast. Why don't you join us there? You might want to pass that around to the other houses."

Justin now wore a wide smile, things inside Hogwarts were looking up. "Smashing, I'll see to that very thing right away. Thank you."

It was a confused Greg who watched the boy pass the information on to his two Hufflepuff friends before then approaching the Ravenclaw table. "Why did you tell him that Neville?"

Neville answered with a question of his own. "Why not?"

Greg was unsuccessful twice as he attempted to find words to answer Neville, this was not lost on the rest of Slytherin house. Cedric Diggory had also paid close attention to the byplay between the houses, he was probably the first outside Slytherin to receive an inclination that there might be dramatic changes afoot inside Hogwarts.

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Since Professor Black collected them outside the great hall, almost all the first years made it to defence class on time. Only two Hufflepuffs were missing, Draco had been too busy concentrating on ignoring everyone that he missed the glaringly obvious. When food was on the table, Ron was oblivious to everything else. Neither boy had any intention of asking for directions.

Sirius took the register, again attempting to match faces to names. He intended his first class to be a memorable one. "Now since this is your first lesson it might not seem fair to ask you the most important

question you'll be faced with in this class over the next seven years. It may also help enforce the maxim that often life is extremely unfair. The question though is really quite a simple one. If someone was about to attack you, what is the best method of defending yourself?"

Draco chose this precise moment to race into the classroom.

"Mr Malfoy, be late for my class again and it will cost you house points. As it is, you can be the first person to answer the question I'm putting on the board."

Sirius moved to the front of his desk and hopped up onto it, leaving his legs swinging in space. He was trying to create a relaxed atmosphere with this class and lazily waved his wand at the board.

Draco studied the question that appeared there for a moment before formulating his answer. "I would use a shield charm professor."

"Very good Draco, now take a seat." Another wave of his wand and 'shield charm' appeared on the board, underneath his original question.

"Mr Thomas, what do you think?"

"Professor Black, I'm a muggleborn and this is my first lesson on magic. I have no idea sir."

"I understand that Mr Thomas but please look at the question again carefully, it doesn't mention magic. Supposing you were faced with someone wielding a gun, what would your answer be?"

"Em, a bullet-proof vest sir?"

""Very good Mr Thomas." A wave of his wand and 'armour' appeared beside Draco's answer.

'Now we've asked a Hufflepuff and a Gryffindor, time for a Ravenclaw. Miss Turpin, an answer if you please?"

"Sir, I would try to negotiate and solve the problem without violence."

Sirius nodded in acceptance as 'negotiate' appeared beside the other two answers while their professor chose his next victim with



great care. "Miss Granger, would you care to enlighten us with your answer please?"

Hermione's answer was precise and to the point. "Don't be there sir."

This drew a few chuckles as Sirius' wand added 'evade' to the answers already on the board.

"Now boys and girls, we currently have answers from every house and both sexes but which are correct? To determine that we have to carry out a class investigation."

The barely contained glee from their professor alerted a certain four Slytherins to how this was going to play out, especially when Sirius floated out from a cupboard some equipment they were familiar with. They should be, it was theirs. Sirius flicked his wand and an armoured vest and helmet made it's way toward Dean.

"Mr Thomas, please put this on."

It was a worried Gryffindor who fastened the Velcro bindings before donning the helmet and goggles. Dean felt incredibly stupid, sitting in class dressed like this. That was up until the moment Professor Black fired a curse at him. He jumped before the professor's outstretched hand halted any further action.

"Mr Thomas, did you feel that?"

Dean had to think for a second, it was being hit with his first ever curse that had made him jump. "No sir, didn't feel a thing."

"Very well done Mr Thomas, you may take that off and five points to Gryffindor."

A tick appeared on the blackboard beside the answer 'armour'. "Mr Malfoy, raise your shield please."

"Huh, ouch! What the ..."

"Where was your shield charm Mr Malfoy?"

Draco hated to make the admission but had no alternative. "I can't cast one yet sir."

"I didn't think you could Mr Malfoy, but it's my job to teach you that skill. Five points to Hufflepuff for your answer and helping me make a point to your classmates."

An X appeared next to Draco's answer on the board. "Miss Turpin, talk me out of it."

"Sir what do you...ouch!"

An X now appeared next to 'negotiate' and Sirius didn't even speak to Hermione, he just cast the same stinging hex at her. He'd deliberately chosen Hermione from the four as she was sitting at the end.

Hermione had been expecting nothing else since they were taught this lesson when they were about seven. She easily dodged the curse, which flew harmlessly past her. Well it would have been harmless if the missing Hufflepuff hadn't chosen that moment to rush into the room and get hit by the hex.

"Sorry I'm...ouch. Bloody hell, that hurt. You can't go hexing folk just because they're late to your class."

"Five points to Miss Turpin and Miss Granger, ten points from Hufflepuff. Five for being late and another five for use of inappropriate language."

"Why do they get points while I get hexed and lose them?"

"Mr Weasley, had you bothered to turn up for class in time, you would know the answer to that question. Now sit down and shut up before I add a detention to the ones you received from your head of house yesterday."

A wave of his wand saw a tick appear next to 'evade' as Sirius jumped down from his perch on the desk. It was time to explain what the lesson had been all about.

"I gave points to everyone who provided us with an acceptable answer because, in certain circumstances, each of those answers

could be the correct course of action to take. Mr Thomas, your armour protected you?"

Dean was looking really pleased with himself as he answered. "Yes sir, I didn't feel a thing."

Sirius moved like lightning and a curse flashed from his wand, it impacted with a suit of armour standing in the corner. The entire class were now staring at the metal breastplate, or rather the hole in the middle of it that was big enough for them to put an arm through.

"Mr Thomas, had I fired that curse at you, do you think you might have felt it?"

Dean had to gulp a few times before he could find his voice, he needed to get his heart out his mouth and back down into his chest where it belonged. His wide smile had vanished the instant the professor's curse hit the metal. "Sir, I'm sure I would definitely have felt that."

The tick beside 'armour' on the board changed to a cross. "As Mr Thomas so eloquently explained to us, armour is a good thing up to a point. There are certain curses that the best armour available can't protect you from. Mr Malfoy, your shield answer falls under exactly the same category. There again are curses no shield can stop."

The visual aid that was the damaged suit of armour drove that point home in a way that none of them would ever forget. Time to forge ahead with the second objective of the lesson.

"Miss Turpin, while your aspirations are to be applauded, my job is to teach you how to act if that method fails. Attempting to negotiate with someone who means you harm would never be my first choice. I always think it is better to negotiate from a position of strength, the other person is more likely to listen to your point of view with your wand placed under their chin."

Lisa nodded in understanding. The professor had taken her answer and showed her how it could be improved upon. His argument was hard to refute and she'd won her first house points for Ravenclaw, Lisa thought her first class at Hogwarts was brilliant.

"Now that leaves us with one answer up there that will always get the job done. It won't matter what the curse is that's fired in your direction if it doesn't hit you. Not only that, it leaves you free to return a few curses of your own. Boys and girls, that's what we're going to be practicing in this class."

The entire class were now sitting just that little bit straighter as Sirius had them eating out of his hand. He reached around and pulled out the paintball gun that he had hidden behind his desk.

A paintball was soon speeding toward Harry but he was already moving, the splat of red paint splashing on Justin's desk behind him generated some yells as a few in the class thought it was his blood. A smiling Harry sat down again as Sirius held the gun up for inspection.

"This gadget here is a paintball gun. It's going to help you hone your reflexes because it can sting like blazes if it hits you in the wrong place. The protective gear Mr Thomas was wearing earlier is designed to ensure you experience nothing more than discomfort when getting hit by one of these paint pellets. The paint tells everyone exactly where the hit was."

Draco had been enjoying the lesson up until now but didn't like this idea. "We're going to use some muggle device to learn about defence?"

Sirius tolerated this interruption with good grace. "Mr Malfoy, it is my intention to use devices like this to help members of this class learn how not to be there when a curse arrives."

"Then why not cast curses? That has to be better than some muggle contraption?"

Sirius shrugged his shoulders by way of an answer. He then barked out what was nothing less than an order. "All those who can cast a stinging hex, do so now with the suit of armour as your target."

Four curses shot out just as Sirius had finished speaking, all appeared powerful and passed into the hole in the breastplate Sirius had made earlier. Theo, Blaise and Pansy were only a moment behind their fellow Slytherins and also managed to hit the suit.

Conner and Edgecome from Ravenclaw both managed to cast the curse though Michael missed the target.

Sirius then handed the gun to Millie and showed her how to pull the trigger, the red splash of paint that appeared rather close to the suit's groin area had every male in the class wincing. The professor's 'sting like crazy if it hit's you in the wrong place' was running through all their minds. It was hard to think of a more 'wrong place' to be hit.

"Now the answer to Mr Malfoy's valid question should be self-evident to the class. Two-thirds of you, including Mr Malfoy, can't cast the stinging hex while Miss Bulstrode hit the target after receiving mere seconds worth of instructions. It's a lot easier to point a gun and pull the trigger."

It was almost time to finish so Sirius outlined his plans for this class. "I intend to use the guns until we're all adapt at dodging before teaching you how to fire curses. We will then work on spell accuracy before tackling shields. Any questions?"

Daphne had thought the lesson was terrific but had a question that needed to be answered. "Sir, how did you know Harry would move in time when you aimed that gun at him?"

She needed to know the answer because Daphne was sure if the professor had fired at her, she would currently be wearing robes covered in red paint.

"A very astute question Miss Greengrass. If I didn't think it would show bias, I would award you house points for it. The answer is really quite simple, the gun actually belongs to Mr Potter. He and his friends have been training with these things for a few years now, I was very confident he'd dodge it since Mr Potter's awesome godfather taught him all his moves."

The bell rang and four Slytherins were trying not to laugh at Sirius' joke, their grins though were bound to draw a comment.

Justin was the one who asked the question. "Well done Potter, so who's this awesome godfather who taught you to move like that?"

Neville's answer had most of the class laughing. "Professor Black."

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Marcus Flint sat that night at dinner and waited for the explosion he knew was coming, the poster he'd placed on the common room notice board guaranteed it. He didn't have long to wait as members of last year's Quidditch team angrily sought him out.

"What the hell is that note all about? All our positions are gone and we have to go through trials?"

"All positions are up for grabs, including mine." This diverted some of their anger and allowed Marcus time to explain. "Sit down and eat guys, this is going to take a while."

He took a moment to put another chicken leg onto his plate before continuing his tale of Quidditch woe. "Professor Black knew our entire play book from last year, and threw most of it away as being unacceptable to Slytherin house. His exact words to me were 'if you think it's acceptable to bludgeon other teams into submission, then Slytherin needs a new Quidditch captain.'"

This ended the complaints toward their captain, they were all in the same situation here. "Black wants Slytherin to outplay and outscore every other team that takes to the park against us, not try and knock them onto the grass by whatever means possible. He was at great pains to point out a winning captain would be more likely to attract interest from professional teams, rather than one whose favourite move was elbowing opposition chasers off their brooms."

Marcus then delivered the kicker, he drew the rest of them closer as he whispered the next bit of news. "I must say Black has put his gold where his mouth is. This is to remain a secret until our first match but he's providing the team with Nimbus two thousand's."

This placed grins on their faces. They still had the opportunity to try out for the team and, with a broom advantage like that, Slytherin had just taken a large leap toward winning the Quidditch Cup.

Marcus made it plain Professor Black would be watching him as he put together Slytherin's team and he would have to choose the best players for each position. What he didn't say was the mixed message that he received from his head of house. It was easy to

see that the Professor wanted certain first years on the team, but he was insisting Marcus had to pick the team on merit. He could only hope they were as good as Professor Black was hinting at, otherwise the Slytherin captain would be faced with quite the dilemma.

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Dudley was sitting down to dinner at the Grangers, he was finding it strange to be here on his own. Emma appeared to read his thoughts.

"Yes it's certainly a lot quieter without those two here, now it's clear who caused all the trouble."

This raised a slight smile from Dudley. "You're only saying that because you know they can't answer you back from Scotland. Can you imagine Hermione's reaction to that accusation, and you just know Harry would support her."

Imagining the scene Dudley described put a smile on all their faces.

"Thanks for staying with us Dudley, I don't know how Emma and I would have coped with an empty house until Christmas. I'm already going off the idea of boarding school, and they've hardly been gone two days."

"I know exactly what you mean. Without those mirrors from Uncle Remus, I think we would all have gone crazy. At least with them, we can still all chat every night and keep each other up to date with what's happening."

Emma ruffled the boy's hair before lifting his empty plate away. "It's one thing to say we were prepared for this, it's totally different being faced with the situation."

This was met with nods of agreement from the two males at the table. Emma intended to have a chat with Lily using her own mirror tonight. Remus had established a 'mothers network' so she, Alice and Amelia could keep in touch with the one person in their group who was actually in the castle. They may have Sirius as their head of house but Lily was going to be their surrogate mother while they were in that castle.

Maia also had a mirror but faced a different problem. Luna was separated from her friends before attending next year. Using magic to alter the documents Luna needed for St Andrews turned out to be ridiculously easy, unfortunately the same couldn't be said of Hogwarts. The castle's admission policy had also stood for hundreds of years and their first of September rule couldn't be changed because a child wanted to attend with her friends.

Dudley was helping tidy up after dinner when his mirror went off, he was soon chatting away. When Dan and Emma heard him laughing along as they described Sirius' lesson, they began to think they might just get through this as a family. A rather extended family to be sure but they wouldn't have it any other way.

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Their Herbology class started off well, Professor Sprout demonstrated a task to the small class before splitting them into groups of four. Since it was only the Slytherins and the Gryffindors, the professor allocated a Gryffindor into each group of three Slytherins. Neville, Harry and Blaise found themselves working with Dean Thomas. The professor also said she didn't mind them chatting as long as they were working.

Dean tried to get the conversation going within their group. "I couldn't believe it when Professor Black pulled out that paintball gun, I thought magical people tended to shy away from all things muggle? Seamus is half-n-half so I really don't have anyone else to ask, hope you don't mind?"

Harry could only smile as he answered the likeable boy. "My mum's parents weren't magical, neither are Hermione's or Dudley. We all grew up in a mixture of both worlds. Most of the time we live in Crawley, in a perfectly normal house that's next door to Hermione's. The school holidays we tend to spend at the manor. It has a Quidditch pitch and a quad bike trail."

"You've got a quad bike?" was asked almost simultaneously as "What's a quad bike?" Harry and Neville were handling the explanations when Harry noticed Hermione glancing over at him, her expression told Harry their Gryffindor was not integrating as well as Dean.



Hermione, Susan and Millie had been allocated Lavender Brown to work with them, the girl was a total nightmare. She'd just fired off at least half-a-dozen questions without pausing for breath, or allowing any opportunity for answers. The blond Gryffindor had spotted Hermione holding hands with Harry from the other side of the great hall, now she wanted to know their entire life history in minute detail.

What really worried Hermione though was the mischievous look Susan had in her eyes. Susan was renowned amongst their group for being the sharpest at pulling pranks, she could spin a believable tale out of nothing. It would never be malicious, was often hilarious and usually embarrassing for anyone who bought into it. She was currently whispering to their Gryffindor co-worker and Lavender's eyes appeared ready to pop out.

"She kissed a frog?"

Hermione's groan alerted Millie that everything here was not as it seemed. "Our Susan has that wide-eyed innocent look down to perfection. Why do I get the feeling the sorting hat couldn't have placed her anywhere else but Slytherin?"

"Sue just loves her practical jokes and Lavender here gives the impression of someone who likes to spread news around. Sue will think it's bloody hilarious if Lavender spreads the story she's spinning all over school."

Millie smiled at the girl she was now thinking of as a new friend, Hogwarts was quickly turning into a better experience than she ever thought possible.

Blaise's main reason for attending Hogwarts was to learn, he was currently being educated in ways that weren't on the Hogwarts curriculum. Just listening to this conversation was opening his eyes to things he couldn't even imagine just a few days ago.

Dean was also enjoying himself. "I'm glad I came to Hogwarts but I'll desperately miss my football, Saturday is going to be hell without being able to see a match."

Harry had a sly glance at Neville before answering. "We may have a way to help you out there. Neville and I intend to sit down and watch

Match of the Day on Saturday night, would you be interested in joining us?"

The expression of longing on the boy's face was pitiful to see. "You wouldn't joke about something like that, would you?"

Neville sounded a cautionary note. "Better check he's not a Manchester United fan first."

Dean acted as if he'd been insulted. "I'm a West Ham fan. Why don't you like Man U?"

"Oh we don't have a problem with them, we're all Crawley City fans. When Sirius discovered that United were also called the Red Devils, he was disgusted and thought Man U should get a new nick-name."

Dean was struggling to believe what he was hearing from Neville, were they trying to wind him up here? "Man U are one of the biggest teams in the world!"

Harry was trying not to laugh, remembering his godfather's indignation. "That doesn't matter to Sirius, he's convinced they stole Crawley's nick-name. Nothing anyone says can convince him otherwise. I'll ask some questions regarding Saturday night and try and let you know by lunchtime."

The group spent the rest of the time working away with Dean constantly humming 'I'm forever blowing bubbles'. Blaise was struggling to make head or tail of this whole situation, he was having an enjoyable time though.

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James was drawn out of the conversation on how his wife's morning had gone when his mirror called. He looked down from the staff table and could see Harry sitting at the Slytherin table with his mirror in his hand. He also noticed Sirius reaching for his pocket.

"Hi dad, Padfoot. I've got something to ask you both. Dean Thomas is apparently a massive football fan and we'd like to invite him to watch Match of the Day with us on Saturday. The problem is that curfew kicks in before the end of the program."

Both heads of house knew exactly what Harry was asking of them, James also understood Padfoot had to take the lead on this one.

"Harry I had planned on watching the football with you guys on Saturday. Tell Dean he's welcome to join us and I'll walk him back to Gryffindor tower after the program finishes. That's providing his head of house agrees to it?"

James had found himself unknowingly holding his breath as the situation unfolded. The enormity of what Harry was proposing was mind blowing. A muggle born Gryffindor was being invited into Slytherin house to watch a muggle sport being broadcast by the BBC. This was a prank against the old establishment of stupendous proportions. "His head of house thinks that's a wonderful idea. Tell Dean it's sorted."

Dean hadn't touched his lunch, that would mean taking his eyes off Harry Potter and then he might miss the signal he was so desperately waiting on. Hogwarts was a strange new world to the boy from the east end of London but being able to see a bit of 'home' would change his entire time in the castle. When Harry turned and gave him the double thumbs-up, it was like West Ham winning promotion all over again. Dean was up on his feet and punching the air in celebration, he didn't even realise he was shouting for joy.

The headmistress cast her eyes over this unusual behaviour before having a word with the boy's head of house. "James, can I assume there is no need to be alarmed concerning Mr Thomas' behaviour?"

"Minerva, to be honest, I feel like doing the same thing myself.

After hearing why the lad was celebrating, only her many years experience kept Minerva's reaction to a mere raising of an eyebrow and a slight smile on her lips. Slytherin and Gryffindor students being civil to each other was the limit of her ambitions regarding the bitter rivals. Having them socialising together was something she thought would not be seen in her lifetime, never mind her tenure as headmistress. Wait until the portraits in her office heard about this, there would be uproar. This news could even see a fight or two break out amongst the former heads of Hogwarts, Minerva would sit back with a wee dram and watch her own particular match unfold.

There were also grumblings about this development amongst the other Slytherin first years, Hermione had an idea how to head it off.

"Guys, since we've got astronomy at midnight on Wednesday, why not make that movie night?"

Neville was first to agree, and book the initial movie night premier. "That's a brilliant idea Hermione. Bags Jungle Book to be up first."

Three pretend groans left Pansy just having to ask. "What's this book about the jungle, and what's a movie?"

Susan answered her housemate. "You're in for a treat Pansy, I wonder if we can get some popcorn in the castle?"

Millie glanced toward Hermione for conformation. "Yes Millie, this time she's telling the truth. Not like today when my handsome Prince Harry was once an amphibian."

Harry groaned as Neville rocked with laughter. He turned to Susan, his admiration visible for all to see. "Who did you find that was stupid enough to fall for that fairy tale? No one's bought that since we were six!"

Susan, Millicent and Hermione all stared at the Gryffindor table where Lavender and Parvati were currently involved in a serious looking conversation.

"I think if we got hold of a few frogs, I could convince some Gryffindors to kiss them."

"Susan, you're terrible. Where are we supposed to find frogs during September in the Scottish highlands?"

The other four Slytherin females in first year had nothing but admiration for their two housemates. The thought of two Gryffindor girls willingly puckering up to a couple of frogs was simply too funny not to laugh. As the joke spread throughout Slytherin, so did the laughter.

Minerva sat at the staff table and thought that Hogwarts was going from strength to strength.

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Severus Snape stared at the same wall he'd faced for almost ten years. The rudimentary calendar he'd painstakingly scratched into the stonework generated a feeling of hope within him that even the dementors couldn't steal away.

Yes, he was certainly physically a shadow of the man who entered this cell. He was barely over thirty yet had white streaks through his hair and you could count his ribs when he took his robe off. The self-made calendar offered Severus the one thing Azkaban had denied him all these years, hope. In two months, Severus Snape would be a free man.

His parents' old house was a muggle one and therefore should have escaped any asset sweep the ministry or goblins carried out on him. He also had some cash squirreled away there, not much but enough to ensure he ate better than he did in this place. He would need time to build up his strength after the ravages Azkaban had bestowed upon him before deciding what his first steps as a free man should be, probably a move out the country.

James Potter already hated him before the incident with Petunia while Lily could put a goblin to shame with the way she could hold a grudge and how vicious she could be. Meeting either would not be beneficial to his health. It would also take some time to discover how the released death eaters would be perceived in post Voldemort Britain. Anything was possible but Severus was fairly certain he would need a one-way ticket to wherever he could afford.

A/N Thanks for reading

## Chapter 12

Lily ran a watchful eye over her brood as they made their way into her charms class. She really had to suppress her maternal instinct that wanted to offer their usual greeting of hugs, this was something the Hogwarts professor was going to struggle becoming accustomed to. Lily consoled herself that at least Harry and Hermione appeared to have slept last night. She was jarred from her parental concerns by someone in the class emitting a loud croaking noise.

Professor Potter was about to stamp her authority on the class when she noticed her four charges for the past ten years attempting not to laugh, the expression of triumph worn on Susan's face was the mother's biggest clue to what was happening here. If there was one person inside Hogwarts who could recognise a prank in progress, that person would be Lily Potter. After all, the professor had many years of personal experience to call on.

The amphibian mating call made another appearance as Lily was reading out the register, but this time she spotted the culprit. There was also more evidence as to just what was going on here staring Lily straight in the face, this helped clue her into what was unfolding in her class. That the croaking call came when she was reading out her son's name was the first clue, Hermione practically biting Harry's shoulder to stop herself from laughing out loud was certainly another. That Susan was proudly sitting there, basking in the obvious admiration of both Harry and Neville, gave Lily all the proof she needed to who the instigator of this prank was.

Lily clearly remembered another incident concerning frogs and decided to play her hunch.

"Mr Weasley, it would appear you have a frog in your throat? Do you require the assistance of Madam Pomfrey or are you just hoping a pretty girl will kiss it better for you?"

The four friends couldn't hold their laughter any longer, even Susan had cracked at that. She had just been reminded why they could never pull any pranks at home, the adults in their lives were all too smart.

Lily knew she had nailed it so pushed ahead, reckoning that hearing the children laugh was worth a few moments of her lesson. "Frogs

into handsome princes is more transfiguration than charms, I'll be sure to pass the information on to my husband though."

She glanced toward a certain four Slytherins who could all imagine how that conversation would go, Prongs and Padfoot would be proud of them. Professor Lily Potter then regained control of her class and delivered an excellent lesson on how to be charming without a prince in sight.

After the lesson was over, a certain quartet of Slytherins hung back and Lily then received the hugs she had been craving earlier. She also had some words with a certain young lady. "Susan Bones, do you remember the trouble you caused the last time you pulled that prank? A certain Mrs Perks was on the phone to me because Sally-Ann kept kissing every frog in their garden pond. Are you telling me they fell for that tale at Hogwarts?"

Neville was smiling as he recalled what led up to that prank. "I remember that now. Sally-Ann had seen Harry flatten those bullies who hit Hermione at St Andrews. She wanted Harry to be her boyfriend and followed us about everywhere."

Susan was now joking and batting her eyes suggestively at Harry while a laughing Hermione had her arm possessively around his waist. "Get your own prince charming Bones. Our Sue here told Sally-Ann that's what she had to do, and then proceeded to tell her exactly how to do it."

Lily was now laughing along with the kids, though it had hardly been funny at the time. "Her poor mother was distraught, had visions of Sally-Ann covered from head to toe in warts. Wait until I tell James and Sirius, you know they're going to be so proud of you."

It was four happy friends who eventually left the charms class, only to discover a very unhappy Lavender Brown waiting on them.

"How could you do that to me? You told me a complete pack of lies and now everyone thinks I'm a complete fool."

Susan was unrepentant though. "It might have escaped your memory Lavender but I distinctly remember saying this was a very embarrassing story and must be kept as a secret. You didn't keep it a secret and I was proven correct, it is a very embarrassing story for

you. Though I will say this, I'm totally impressed the story made it all the way to Hufflepuff in such a short space of time. You certainly possess some of the finest gossiping skills I've ever seen."

They walked away and left a young Gryffindor who was quite pleased with the high praise she'd just received, that was until Lavender remembered the entire school now thought she was an idiot. She'd set herself up for a confrontation with Susan and ended up forgetting all about it, how the hell did that happen?

-oOoOo-

Sirius almost choked on his lunch as Lily told them what had happened in charms class this morning.

"James, you have to transfigure something into a frog at their transfiguration lesson tomorrow. Lily, it should be easy to come up with a potion that requires part of a frog. Love, all I know about astronomy is that it's taught by a beautiful professor and there's a dog star up there somewhere. Please tell me there's something in the sky related to frogs?"

Aurora appeared to think for a moment before answering her husband. "Well I could point them toward the planet Kermit, but I don't know how many of them would understand the reference."

Sirius was now chuckling like mad as he kissed Joy on the top of her head. His daughter giggled at her silly daddy as she enjoyed sitting on her godmother's knee.

Lily though was shaking her head in mock indignation. "Oh I do hope my goddaughter takes her inelegance from her mother." She then spoke directly to Joy, ensuring that everyone could hear though. "Daddy is so silly, imagine believing that anyone would name a planet after a muppet."

It was time to face a crestfallen Sirius Black again and try to hold her laugh in. "There is no planet Kermit Sirius."

The marauder looked from his daughter, to Lily before finally settling on his wife. "You pranked me?"



Joy decided it was time to use the new skill her daddy had taught her. Giggling happily, she clapped her hands at silly daddy. This was met with howls of laughter from all along the staff table, or rather Sirius' reactions to his daughter's antics were.

-oOoOo-

Dean was about to enter his dorm when he suddenly discovered his feet no longer reached the ground. This phenomenon was not caused by someone casting spells on him, in fact no magic was used at all. Instead, a redheaded twin on either side of him had lifted the boy up by his arms. They made off with their shocked prize to the third year dorm before putting him back on his feet once more.

Dean couldn't tell the twins apart, that they kept finishing each other's sentences certainly didn't help the lad with that almost impossible task.

"Mr Thomas, welcome to our office. We would like a quick word with you."

"Rumour has it that you have been given a unique opportunity to assist Gryffindor with its very reason for existing."

"Namely, to prank the Slytherins."

"We would like you to take a few things we'll supply..."

Dean could see what was coming and decided to put a stop to this right now. "No. Not a chance, never going to happen."

The twins were surprised at the strength of their young housemate's refusal to help. George attempted to clear any misunderstanding. "Perhaps we haven't explained this well enough, the honour of Gryffindor house is at stake here..."

Dean was unimpressed by this line of argument, quickly countering it with one of his own. "I'll tell you exactly what's at stake here, my continued ability to watch the Hammers while living in this castle. I was a West Ham supporter long before I ever heard of Gryffindor, and I'll be a West Ham supporter long after I leave Hogwarts. On this subject my loyalties are crystal clear. I will not ruin my only

chance to watch football inside Hogwarts so you two can pull a few pranks on Slytherin."

Fred was distinctly unimpressed with this less than helpful attitude being shown by a first year. "So it doesn't matter to you that they made a laughing stock of a Gryffindor, one of your fellow first years?"

Dean poured scorn all over that suggestion. "Who in their right mind would believe that a frog could turn into a man, with a bloody kiss too! That's a children's fairy story."

Fred couldn't believe what he was hearing. "You have herd of animagus? A witch or wizard who can turn themselves into an animal."

Dean was extremely sceptical about this as the other twin continued.

"The headmistress can change into a cat, Professor James Potter is a stag while Professor Sirius Black is registered as a large black dog. You can check in the library, there's a list of all animagus who are registered with the ministry."

"You expect me to believe that?"

Fred could only shrug his shoulders. "Ask your friends if you don't believe us. Harry himself told us his dad's nickname is 'Prancer' because Hermione didn't know the difference between a stag and a reindeer."

George was chuckling at the memory. "He also told us she was two when she said it, and that's the last time she was wrong about something."

This placated Dean slightly, on the animagus issue at least. "I'll think about talking to them but it's a definite no to pranking the Slytherin dorm. Professor Black will be there to..."

Dean never got the chance to say another word. With a precision the military would have been proud of, both twins had Dean once more in motion as they rushed him down the staircase to his own dorm.

Fred was now ranting. "Dean, forget we even mentioned this..."

"Mentioned what, oh brother of mine. I have no idea what you are talking about. Who is this first year anyway?"

Dean's feet touched down outside his own dorm as the Weasley twins hurriedly made their way back up the stairs. He couldn't help but wonder what the twins knew about Professor Black that scared them off.

-oOoOo-

Tracy and Daphne were a little uncomfortable about tonight so approached Hermione to see just what they'd let themselves in for. "Hermione, just what is a movie night?"

Daphne had a follow on question. "More importantly, what's the dress code?"

"Well, normally we'd usually have our nightclothes on as we would tumble into bed after the movie finished. Just wear whatever you're comfortable lounging around the boys dorm in."

Tracy was left struggling for breath, never mind words, so it was left to Daphne to question what they just heard. "You mean we're going into the boys dorm?"

Hermione nodded. "They can't come in here and we would disturb anyone studying if we did it in the common room. Don't worry about it, we do it all the time at home."

Daphne was finding this situation hard to believe, she was worried they were being set-up like Lavender Brown. "I've never even been inside a boy's room before, it's simply not done."

Hermione's mirror went off at that point so it was left to Susan to reassure them. Hermione was too busy looking at Luna's sad face reflected back from her mirror. Since Luna was normally the cheeriest soul amongst them, you didn't need to be a seer to know that something was wrong. "Hey Luna, what's up?"

"Oh I just wanted a chat. Dudley told me you were holding movie night this evening and it just made me miss you four even more."

All six friends enjoyed movie night but it was Luna's favourite. She was always first there and loved lounging with her friends while losing herself in a good story.

"I don't need to ask who picked tonight's movie and I'll miss singing along to all the songs. Dudley has been wonderful with me but I'm sure he's missing you even more than I am."

Hermione could see the tears beginning to form in the corner of Luna's eyes. They all missed Dudley and Luna but it would appear to be harder for the ones left behind. It was time to cheer her friend up. "Luna, remember I told you about having talks with Aunt Lily on what our options were after leaving Hogwarts? Well that wasn't all we talked about."

She could clearly see Luna's interest was peaked so pressed ahead. "You couldn't attend Hogwarts this year because of their strict admissions policy. You have to be eleven before the first of September."

Luna was nodding into her mirror, she knew this and wondered what Hermione was leading up to. She didn't have long to wait.

"We did some research and nowhere in that admissions policy does it say you must begin your education in first year."

Hermione enjoyed watching her friend's face closely as the penny dropped, Luna was soon wearing a wide smile. "That would mean I could be in the same year as you guys, and then leave with you as well?"

Hermione's smile now matched her friend's. "We planned on telling you next month as part of your birthday surprise. When I saw you I thought you could use a little boost tonight. We've got you all Hogwarts first year books and you'll get a copy of all our notes sent home with Aunt Lily at the weekends. She'll also arrange for you to be here and sit the end of year exams along with us. Then next September, you could be a second year Slytherin."

Luna though was thinking ahead much further than that. "If I leave the same time as you, that means I would be able to go to university with you, Harry and Dudley. That's if you want me too?"

"Of course we want you to, when has Dudley ever been able to say no to you? Neville and Susan are welcome to join us as well."

The Luna she knew was now looking back at her through the mirror. A Luna who was so bubbling with excitement she could hardly sit still. "That's fantastic Hermione, but I need to go now. I want to catch Dudley and tell him the news before his mirror is tied up sending you the movie. Send my love to everyone and you better believe I'll pass those exams."

She was gone in the blink of an eye and Hermione was sure she'd done the right thing. A down Luna was not something she wanted to see anytime soon, she was also betting the news would put a smile on Dudley's face too. They hadn't told him because he was rubbish at keeping secrets, especially from Luna who could read him like a book.

Hermione was now certain there would be at least four of them sharing a flat and attending uni, Susan and Neville were more of the 'wait and see what happens' variety but couldn't be ruled out.

Meanwhile Susan was trying not to laugh at the state Hermione had left Tracy and Daphne in. it was clear to see their imaginations were running riot and she was so tempted to tease but settled for the truth, this time. "Listen you two, after a movie night we usually say goodnight to the boys and head back to our OWN beds."

The blushing this caused with Daphne and Tracy had Susan biting her lip to stop the wisecracks that were running through her head from being spoken. "We're going to watch a movie and I can assure you the boys will be perfect gentlemen, nothing will happen."

Susan decided to give them a bit of history. "When we started St Andrews there were some older boys who thought it would be ok to bully us, they were about five year older than us too. Two had grabbed me while the third had Luna by the hair. When the other four heard her yelp in pain, they came running."

Pansy and Millie now gave up all pretence that they weren't hanging on Susan's every word.

"Dudley and Neville jumped the one who had Luna while Harry and Hermione tackled the two who had hold of me. One of them made the mistake of punching Hermione."

Susan gave a little pause for dramatic effect before continuing. "Harry magically blasted them flat on their backs and about ten yards along the corridor, he was five at the time. That was before Uncle Dan arranged martial arts classes for us."

All eyes switched for a second to Hermione who was still on her mirror before returning to Susan. "We've got the rest of our lives to decide if we want to be pureblood princesses but tonight we're just going to have some harmless fun with our friends. As I said the guys will be perfect gentlemen, Harry and Neville wouldn't have it any other way. These guys are our friends, when we're a good bit older we can decide if we want it to be something more than that."

Susan couldn't resist her last statement as the blushes started again. She had been raised in the constant company of three boys but these girls hadn't. Not one of them even had a brother and this would be their first time in the company of boys without an adult hovering over them.

Susan noticed Hermione was finished talking to Luna and couldn't resist teasing her, she knew Hermione would just come right back at her. "I mean girls, it's not like we expect any of them to offer marriage over popcorn. Though, if a certain dark haired, green-eyed hunk were to ask..."

She wasn't wrong in her guess, Hermione verbally came right after her. "Susan Bones, I hope you're taking into account that you will be sleeping in the bed next to mine for seven years. How would you like to wake one morning as a frog? An ugly frog that requires a kiss from Lavender Brown before you could revert back to normal?"

Susan knew she was in dangerous territory and backed off immediately. She would never reveal Hermione's secret and was only teasing, probably not her best idea though. "Just trying to lighten the mood here."

"Some things aren't for sharing Sue."

"You're right and I'm sorry Hermione, you know I never would."

Hermione smiled at her friend and headed for the dorm's bathroom to get ready.

The other four girls were left wondering if Hermione was warning off Susan from attempting to snag Harry, only Sue and Luna knew about Harry's promise to Hermione and neither girl would ever tell.

Eventually Tracy asked the question that they all wanted to know the answer to. "Could Hermione really do that?"

"At the moment, probably not. Give her some time though and my answer would be different. When that girl sets her mind to something, there's no stopping her. I was letting my mouth run away from me and Luna usually cuts me off with a well-timed quip. I really miss her and hope she can be with us next year."

Susan could see the girls didn't really believe her about Hermione. "Remember I told you what Harry did to the boys that hit her? Had it been Harry they hit, Hermione would probably have put them through a wall. I'm a powerful witch but those two are just awesome."

The four girls were left wondering about the conundrum that was Hermione Granger. This muggle born witch was slowly but surely making them question everything they'd been taught to believe about being a pureblood.

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When they reached the boys' dorm, the girls found their head of house waiting on them. That he held family size bags of popcorn was a good indication they weren't in any trouble. He also had a board with him, which intrigued them all until Sirius asked for the four mirrors. He took the four expanded mirrors and placed them flat on the board, his wand touched the centre where the four met and a click was heard. Sirius then placed the board on the wall and the sticking charm held it there.

"We designed this board specifically for you lot, that then led us to see the commercial potential from this system. Padfoot for Thumper."

Dudley appeared on the mirrors but, instead of there being four of him, the mirrors were now acting like one big screen.

"Hi Padfoot, hey guys. Got the video all set up and ready to play, the mirror stand is lined up to. Just wanted to say that was wonderful news you gave Luna Hermione, it really gave her a boost and something to aim for. I'll cover my mirror while I put it in the stand, wouldn't want you to get motion sickness."

The screen then went black as they could here Dudley laughing at his own joke, Luna's news had certainly cheered him up to. They then found themselves staring at the TV screen as Dudley got ready with the remote. Susan was busy dishing out the popcorn into bowls and passing them around as they settled down to watch the video.

The Slytherins found themselves mesmerised by this combination of using what they were told was drawings to tell a tale. They quickly got into the music to and the only slightly sour note was when they discovered the snake was a villain. Once Baloo made his appearance though, that fact was soon forgotten about.

Purebloods, and especially Slytherins, were taught you didn't show your emotions in public so the riotous laughter and singing coming from the first year dorm was always going to attract attention. There were soon loads of upper years sticking their heads in to see just what all the fuss was about. They knew their head of house had been in there earlier so whatever this was had been officially sanctioned.

By the time Sirius made it back with Minerva in tow, over half of his house was now in the dorm and staring at the movie. He'd attempted to explain the device to the headmistress but had failed miserably, watching the amazement on her face was well worth the effort of convincing Minerva to come down here.

"That screen is made up of four mirrors, we've got it up to sixteen in tests before the picture quality starts to be affected. A sixteen mirror unit would be the size of the one we're proposing to place in the great hall."

Minerva's gaze never left the screen as she spoke to her former student. "Tell me again what this can do?"



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All the first year were tired after being up late last night for their astronomy class, most were at breakfast with the intention of heading back to their dorm for forty winks after they had finished eating. They all paid strict attention though when the headmistress stood and called for a moment of everyone's time.

"Last night, Professor Sirius Black asked me to accompany him to a Slytherin dorm where I witnessed something truly magical. A signal was sent from a muggle home outside London and was watched on a screen in the first year boys' dorm. It was something called a movie."

This had everyone paying close attention, especially those who knew what a movie was.

"All the equipment had been supplied by PMP and the signal was sent by the Potters' nephew from the home of Miss Granger. I understand arrangements have already been made to use this system to show a sport called football on Saturday night."

This drew cheers as people began wondering how to wangle an invite, you couldn't just gatecrash Slytherin house.

"Now the reason that I am standing here mentioning this today is that PMP have approached me with the idea of erecting one of these screens inside the great hall."

This led to a lot more cheering, Minerva almost smiled as she noticed that most of the cheering was coming from Slytherin house.

"This device is still at the development stage so Hogwarts will be getting a preview before anyone else, I'm told this will be the first one anywhere in Britain. PMP are also investigating the possibility of using this screen to show some professional Quidditch matches."

This certainly got a few cheers, the entire school knew how big a Quidditch fan the headmistress was so the screen would definitely be happening.

"I have agreed the screen can be fitted with a trial period of six months set."

This really got everyone cheering now, even Draco and Ron thought the idea of being able to see Quidditch while sitting in the great hall was a brilliant idea.

It would appear only one person in the great hall had a problem with this plan, Lily wasn't slow in confronting James and Sirius with her concerns. "Won't this put pressure on Dudley to keep the screen filled with content? It will also tie up his mirror and he won't be able to chat with the rest of them."

Sirius moved quickly to dispel Lily's concerns. "The screen we're putting in the hall won't be linked to Dudley's mirror, it's a different system altogether. The mirror he'll use will be tied directly to the screen and won't have the functions of their mirrors, it will be purely a transmitter."

James was nodding in agreement as he further explained the thinking behind this. "We plan to have it on the factual channels – discovery – nature, that kind of thing unless showing something special. Once the system is set up in Hermione's room, it will simply be a case of switching it on. The screen in the hall will only respond to commands from the marauders."

This eased Lily's fears somewhat, her husband then proceeded to dispel them totally.

"Remus has contacted the Quidditch board about the possibility of beaming a live game into Hogwarts, they went for it immediately and are very excited about the potential of our system. I can see him and Dudley attending the match to send it here, I'm trying to keep Dudley as involved in our magical lives as possible."

James then found a pair of green eyes giving him a look so full of love, longing and passion, the Head of Gryffindor knew he would struggle to get through the rest of the day without grabbing his wife into his arms. He would suggest missing lunch but they would need to come up with an excuse their kids and the Blacks would believe. His wife's smile convinced him he could come up with something, he was a marauder after all.

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James actually pulled a masterstroke of misdirection. He once more had the hall buzzing and no one noticed the Potters were missing from the staff table at lunchtime. He'd had a word with Rolanda Hooch and pointed her in Minerva's direction. This saw the headmistress stand to address her students for the second time that day.

"I have been advised that this years intake of first year students may contain some real Quidditch talent."

Both Draco Malfoy and Ron Weasley were sure the headmistress was talking about them.

"I have already given my permission for any first years having the skill and ability to be selected for their house team to be allowed to play. Madam Hooch though has brought a Hogwarts rule to my attention. Before a student can take part in a trial for their house Quidditch team, they must first have received a flying lesson within Hogwarts. Since the first house trial is being held on Saturday, the first years will now receive their flying lesson tomorrow."

This announcement excited not only the first years, the rest of the students were left wondering which of the first years could be good enough to make their house team. No first year had made a house Quidditch team in over a hundred years.

Since their next class was transfiguration, Harry and co didn't notice there were no Potters at the staff table. They were too busy looking forward to their lessons.

Sirius was also too busy thanking Rolanda to miss the Potters. His plans for Slytherin dominating this year's Quidditch cup were almost scuppered before it began.

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James Potter bounced into his class, a wide grin plastered on his face, and immediately captured his students' attention by transfiguring his desk into a giant frog. It gave a very loud croak and had the class laughing before the professor changed it back into his desk.

"That, young witches and wizards, is transfiguration. This is one of the most difficult and demanding branches of magic, it is also one of the most rewarding."

At this, their professor disappeared, leaving a magnificent stag in his place.

A certain four Slytherins had been waiting for this very event and sprang into action. Hermione was out of her seat and produced a carrot from her robes that she'd brought for this very purpose. Susan was right behind her. Prancer was soon munching on the offered carrot and enjoying both girls scratching him between his antlers.

Now that the girls were blocking the stag's view, Neville and Harry took out the Christmas tree baubles and used their wands to levitate the delicate and shiny balls onto Prancer's antlers. Mission accomplished, the girls made it back to their seats. Their classmates were now sniggering and giggling at this noble beast that now had baubles dangling from its horny extremities.

As Prancer reverted once more into James Potter, the delicate baubles crashed onto the stone floor of the castle. They shattered into thousands of tiny pieces but it was the cloud of green gas they emitted that held everyone's attention. Anyone who'd ever watched the Wizard of Oz would recognise the effect as the one used when the wicked witch appeared/disappeared. They would also recognise the effect on Professor Potter. He now had green skin and a large, unsightly wart on his nose.

The class held its collective breath, desperate to laugh but terrified as to how their professor would react to being pranked.

James could clearly see he had green hands and suspected the rest of his body would be verdigris too, another transfiguration spell and the blackboard became a full-length mirror. He was fighting to control his laughter at the prank they had pulled off. Though James Potter was marauder, he was also a Hogwarts professor and had to maintain classroom discipline. This forced him to take some action.

"Now what we saw here today was a nice use of misdirection, a good skill for defence. Then charms were used to place the items where they needed to be, lastly potions were required to achieve the required affect."

There was not a sound as the class waited to see what would happen next.

"Quite impressive if I say so myself. Unfortunately, this is your transfiguration class. Since none was used, I'm left with no option but to deal with the perpetrators of this scheme."

He paused to let that sink in before continuing. "Bones, Granger, Longbottom and Potter, you will now be spending your Sunday with me. I will also be having words with your head of house and your Uncle Remus will defiantly be hearing from me. Now, on with today's lesson..."

The class thought the four were in real trouble, they had no idea the quartet were already planning on spending Sunday with Professor Potter anyway. The four could also imagine the talk with Sirius would be full of laughter while Remus might get a bit of a ribbing for providing them with the potion.

Slytherin actually ended the lesson twenty points up after all four received five points each for effortlessly transfiguring their matches into needles. Since they were the only students in the class to manage this feat of magic, no accusation of favouritism could be levelled at the professor.

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Dean couldn't wait to tell the Weasley twins they were right about Professor Potter being a stag. The twins' reaction on hearing a first hand account of the prank that the four snakelet's had pulled was complicated and somewhat unexpected.

Fred and George found themselves feeling amazed, delighted and depressed all at the same time. Amazed four first years had managed to pull it off, delighted too that someone had finally gotten one over their new head of house and one of their idols. They were also depressed though that these four Slytherins appeared destined to take on the mantle as this generation's marauders.

Pranking the Brown girl appeared to be purely opportunistic, they had seen the chance and took it. This latest effort though was an entirely different league of pranking. Their take down of Professor

Potter required careful planning, precise coordination, a fair bit of skill and a rather large dose of nerve.

At the moment the Weasley twins were forced to admit four kids who hadn't been in the castle a week yet were outclassing them. This state of affairs couldn't be allowed to continue for any length of time, they would have to regroup, study and learn from these Slytherins.

After all, these were not any ordinary kids but young witches and wizards who'd been raised by the marauders. Life was all about challenges and they both knew they had a massive one on their hands. They may be losing the battle at the moment but Fred and George Weasley were determined to win the pranking war.

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Barty Crouch felt he had won his war but the imminent release of the former death eaters might see a few more battles still having to be fought. The minister for magic wasn't worried, these people would soon find themselves facing a very different magical Britain from the one they knew a decade ago. Barty was certain that if those trials had been held tomorrow, he would be guaranteed the verdicts he originally wanted all those years ago. There would have been one large dementor picnic as they fed on the souls of these scum.

As minister, he'd pushed hard to get reforms into their society that simply wouldn't have been possible back then. Barty considered it rather ironic that the death eaters not only provided the political impetus for these changes, they financed them too.

The wizarding economy benefited greatly from the massive injection of gold their asset stripping allowed. Those witches and wizards who were most resistant to change were the same ones whose legitimate businesses were suddenly making them a lot wealthier. In any contest between wealth and tradition, gold would win with these people every time. Not only was the wizarding economy booming, the country had never been safer. Those were two big factors in seeing Barty re-elected minister twice in the last ten years.

Amelia Bones had used the extra funds provided from the death eater captures to restructure and rebuild their auror force into something the ministry was rightly proud of. Barty had his ministry adopting the philosophy of speaking softly but carrying a big stick.

Their auror department was one hell of a big stick, and the minister made sure everyone knew it. Crime was at an all time low.

When you then factored in a national newspaper that had built on its reputation for investigative reporting and campaigning for things people actually wanted, you had a world that would appear alien to a person from a decade ago.

The Prophet had already started another popular campaign to monitor the released prisoners closely, and to have them returned to Azkaban at the first sign of trouble. With a chief reporter who had an incredible knack of sniffing out a story, Rita Skeeter should see a few of the death eaters back in their former quarters before too long.

Yes their society had changed beyond recognition but one thing still remained the same, Barty's determination to see every one of these death eater bastards suffer as much as he had.

Barty had dedicated his life to reaching the top of his chosen profession, becoming minister though was a rather hollow victory in the end. Not only did Barty have no one to share his achievement with, he no longer had a son to pass his legacy onto. The law may say these people had served their time and should be set free, that didn't mean Barty had to agree with it. If Rita Skeeter or Amelia Bones got anything on these scum, they would once more be his. One toe out of line and they would be back inside their recently vacated cells quicker than they could say 'dark lord'.

A/N Thanks for reading

## Chapter 13

Happy Slytherins who effortlessly interacted with their peers in the other three houses was not something Hogwarts was accustomed to. The entire school appeared to be adopting a 'wait and see' policy before passing any comment, never mind becoming involved. This was especially true of the young Slytherins own house. Slytherins acting in such an un-Slytherin manner was certainly something that was worth the watching.

Add to that the headmistress alluding to their being fliers with the potential to make this year's Quidditch teams and it was perhaps understandable that there was an audience at the recently announced first years' flying lesson. Nearly everyone who didn't have a class at that particular time turned up. Draco Malfoy was convinced they were all here to see him while Ronald Weasley was almost as delusional. Ron had convinced himself that it was him that McGonagall had been talking about, Quidditch was in every Weasley's blood. Ron may have been sorted into Hufflepuff but that didn't mean he wouldn't give them the benefit of his Quidditch skills, only after they begged him of course.

Since Malfoy had no friends to talk to, he had to content himself with making announcements that were loud enough for everyone to hear. "This is where true breeding will show. Some of you have no right to be on a broom, far less at Hogwarts."

Susan attempted to shut Malfoy up before any of her friends took direct action, she didn't want them missing tomorrows Quidditch trials by getting a detention for flattening this annoying prick. "Malfoy, if there is ever a house at Hogwarts where empty boasts and inflated egos are things to be coveted, you and your buddy Weasley there would not only be in it but already wearing prefect badges."

Malfoy was all ready to retaliate against calling Weasley his buddy when Madam Hooch arrived. The flying instructor had that air of someone you should never mess with, she also had the ability to ban you from flying.

Rolanda was walking up and down the line of students, giving them her usual dire warning of what would happen if they even thought about misbehaving, when she noticed something most peculiar. There were Hufflepuffs, Ravenclaws and even a Gryffindor mixed in



with the Slytherins. Madam Hooch would have been even more astonished to discover these non-Slytherin students were all muggleborns. She did manage to ignore all the sniggering as she got ripped into Malfoy for holding his broomstick all wrong.

When they were finally allowed into the air, a certain four Slytherins kept a very close eye on those classmates who were sitting on a broom for the very first time. Dean was really beginning to enjoy himself, Justin wanted his broom fitted with a seatbelt and parachute while Terry just wanted his feet back on terra firma.

Malfoy and Weasley though were flying about like idiots, causing mayhem wherever they went. Draco easily managed to goad Ron into playing follow my leader, a decision they would both soon regret. The arrogant blond's intentions were clear though his execution was crap. As Malfoy shot toward the ground, he suddenly slammed on the breaks to help him pull out of the dive. Unfortunately, Ron was right on his bristles and determined to prove he was more than capable of emulating anything Draco could do. Instead of pulling up and watching Ron spread himself all over the grass, Draco's breaking manoeuvre saw the chasing flier slam into the back of him at the top speed these brooms were capable of.

The loud cracks that reverberated across the lawn weren't just from the old brooms breaking as two boastful boys were reduced to a pair of cry-babies. They got absolutely no sympathy from a raging flying instructor, rather detention and levitated to Madam Pomfrey. Harry had already led everyone back onto the ground by the time Madam Hooch had finished shouting at the two crying boys. If nothing else, they provided a powerful visual aid as to why you shouldn't be attempting flying manoeuvres your current skill level couldn't handle.

Marcus was slightly disappointed, the four students he'd come specifically to watch had done nothing out of the ordinary. If it wasn't for getting to see those two idiots crash, the Slytherin Quidditch captain would have considered this a wasted afternoon.

Taking into account what his head of house had told him, Marcus then reconsidered what he'd just seen. If these four really were the superb fliers Professor Black claimed they were, now was probably not the time to be showing those skills off. There was also the fact that these old school brooms weren't really up to any taxing manoeuvres, you would certainly be risking your life if you threw one

into a tailspin. Could these four be more Slytherin than anyone thought?

-oOoOo-

Dinner that night was treated to the entertaining loud feud between Draco Malfoy and Ron Weasley. Each was sure the other was to blame for today's accident and subsequent detentions. The flying ban was probably more painful for the boys than the first two combined. Their closing finale earned them even more detentions when they challenged each other to a duel at midnight. Not the brightest thing to do when Professor Sprout was already making her way over there to shut them up. Both then sullenly, but thankfully quietly, returned to eating their dinner. Ron Weasley had the disgusting habit of not bothering to check whether his mouth was full or not before shouting, extremely unpleasant for anyone in close proximity or with a direct line of sight.

Lily wished the four at the Slytherin table good luck for their Quidditch trial tomorrow before heading home to Crawley for the weekend. She collected a few letters home and class notes for Luna, she would see them all again on Sunday evening.

-oOoOo-

Saturday morning saw four very excited first year Slytherins heading for the Quidditch pitch. Marcus had decided that the only way he could play this situation was straight down the middle, and had designed this morning's trials accordingly. The first part of their trial would be an obstacle course, a course that every trialist was obliged to complete before they could move on to the second part of the morning. As Marcus had suspected, Professor Black made an appearance before he even had a chance to get things underway.

"I know first year students aren't allowed to bring their own brooms to Hogwarts, so I managed to borrow these for you. Their owners aren't using them at the moment so you should have no problem borrowing them for the entire year."

Professor Black then handed the four first years a Nimbus two thousand each, it would only be later Marcus would discover that each broom had a set of golden initials on it. Initials that, coincidentally, corresponded to the person now flying it.

There were seventeen people trying out for the team, including the six members from last year. Marcus split them up into four groups, deliberately putting a first year in each of the groups. His motive was simple, if they wanted to play with the big boys then they would do so from the start. He wanted each group's turn at the obstacle course to be competitive and that's exactly what he got. Unfortunately for Marcus, all four races were won by the youngest person in them.

With some obstacle course failures and last year's beaters being unopposed for their positions, Marcus was left with nine people trying out for chaser. All four first years wanted a shot at seeker too, but that would be later. With three teams of three chasers, Marcus had no option but to have two first years in one of them.

Instead of this team being at a disadvantage though, this soon proved to be a winning combination. He had been constantly switching the teams, searching for the best blend of chasers, when he tried the unthinkable. Three first years against the three biggest Slytherins he had available. He had suspected it would be a slaughter and he was right, it was only who got slaughtered that Marcus made a serious error with. These firsties were amazing and already appeared to have a great understanding of where their teammates were, the larger Slytherins just couldn't get near them.

Marcus also quickly discovered that it didn't matter which three firsties he played, they all just gelled together to form one of the best set of chasers he'd ever seen at Hogwarts. While his brain was still trying to comprehend what his eyes were telling him, the captain found himself being quietly approached by last year's Slytherin seeker.

"Marcus, we both can see any of those four could fly rings around me. I'll just withdraw and save us both some embarrassment. That will also give me more time to go and see if I can find anyone stupid enough to bet against us for this year's Quidditch cup. After the match against Gryffindor, no one will touch that bet."

By the time everyone landed, Marcus really didn't have to say anything. All the other trialists were already congratulating the four youngest Slytherins before heading off to the showers. Their captain studied the quartet before speaking. "It would appear the only

decision I've got to make is which one of you to play at seeker. Any preferences?"

Harry had a question for the older boy. "Em, why do you have to choose just one of us?"

Hermione explained what Harry meant to Marcus. "Back at home we change about all the time, we're all comfortable playing either position."

Susan was nodding and once more proving why the hat sorted her into Slytherin. "Just because one of us plays seeker against the Gryffindors, that doesn't mean they have to play there for the other two matches."

Hermione saw where she was now coming from. "Sue, that is brilliant. Hufflepuff will watch the game and then have their strategy blown away when we line up differently against them."

Neville was also in tune with what was happening here. "That's right but it gets even better. By the time we play Ravenclaw, they will have mentally exhausted themselves trying to work out all the team permutations we could come up with for their match."

Harry was laughing along with his friends and new captain but had a serious question to ask. "Can I play seeker against Gryffindor? With my dad as head of house, I'd love to get one over on him."

Susan was quick to put her name forward for the Hufflepuff match, since her aunt was a former Puff.

Hermione then suggested that a 'wait and see' policy might be better for the Ravenclaw game. Since they didn't know who would be playing seeker for that match, they could hardly give any information away.

The four then walked away with their brooms over their shoulder, leaving behind a bemused but very happy Slytherin Quidditch captain. Marcus hoped there would be someone with a camera to record Wood's face after the Gryffindors lost the first match of the season. He felt a hand on his shoulder and turned to see his head of house there. Marcus had been so focused on the trials, he'd forgotten all about Professor Black.

"Can I assume they made the team?"

"Not only did they make the team, they suggested we change it match by match to keep the opposition off balance. Those four are probably the most Slytherin-like people in our house."

This got a laugh out of Sirius as he walked back to the castle with Marcus.

-oOoOo-

Match of the Day in the Great Hall was an instant and massive success. Every student, and most of the staff, were present to watch the screen being used for the first time. That the muggleborns were also having to explain the rules of the game to their friends was also good for integrating a different point of view to people who barely knew this side of the world existed.

Remus was there for the inaugural use of their screen and the board of PMP were all very worried at this runaway success. It was the age old question that followed phenomenal success, how the hell do you follow that?

"We've just made a rod for our own backs tonight. These kids are watching the BBC's broadcast of a sport that they've been covering for decades, they will expect our future Quidditch matches to be up to this standard."

Remus could see what concerned James and pretty much had to agree with his friend. The same thoughts had been running through his head, along with the realisation of just how big a job they'd undertaken here. "The BBC have multiple cameras, action replays, slow motion and extreme close-ups along with a full commentary team to explain to their viewers exactly what's happening. What the hell possessed us to think we could match up to that? You practically need omnioculars to really see what's happening during a Quidditch match. Our coverage is going to look like coloured dots dancing around the screen, it's gonna look like shit compared to that!"

Sirius hated to be the bearer of more bad news but it was time to get all the problems out in the open. "Not only that, their sport has strict

time limits set. You know when a match will end, and it's not when someone catches the snitch. We might need to have people taking it in shifts to film some of the longer matches, who's got eight hours spare to sit and watch Quidditch when about seven of those hours are practically guaranteed to be as boring as hell?"

James took a deep breath. "Ok guys, let's work on the problems one at a time."

The three marauders sat there working out the future of broadcasting in the magical world, Remus was going to consult with Dan to see if there were other solutions to some of the stuff they had no idea about.

While Saturday night was unquestionably a success, Sunday lunchtime managed to eclipse even that. The nature programme concerning a family of meerkats had even the watching staff on the edge of their seats. This saw the penny drop that the students were not only being entertained, they were being educated at the same time. James and Sirius were soon being approached about what type of programmes were available to broadcast, especially after it became known that Aurora planned to show an Astronomy series on it. Being on top of the Astronomy tower in December or sitting in the Great Hall with a hot chocolate and seeing the stars on the big screen was not a hard choice to make.

-oOoOo-

After dinner that Sunday night, Minerva called the Quidditch captains of Slytherin and Gryffindor forward for a word. Both James and Sirius were there too but had already agreed the decision was going to be left up to their captains.

The headmistress attempted to put the two worried students at ease. "I have a proposition for you gentlemen, please take some time to think about it before giving me your answers. PMP have approached me and asked if they could film the first Quidditch match of the season. This would allow them to test their equipment and techniques at a live match, and we could all watch it again later that evening."

Both captains were eager to say yes but the headmistress wasn't finished yet. "There is a downside to this proposal, they would like

the game moved forward to as soon as possible. Now the upside, league officials and probably representatives from the teams would be coming to Hogwarts to watch the match with us. I will not consent to moving this match though if it hands an advantage to one of the teams. What are your thoughts gentlemen?"

Marcus instantly recognised this was a fabulous opportunity to get some recognition as a Quidditch captain, this match would probably make the Daily Prophet too. Time to goad the Gryffindor into saying yes.

"Headmistress, I have already picked my team to beat Gryffindor. A few training nights and we would be more than ready to play."

Oliver knew most of his team would be the same as last year, and he'd already had the replacement chaser he needed recommended to him. He too recognised what a great opportunity this was to get noticed.

"If Gryffindor can get the pitch this Saturday, I'm sure we could be ready to play the following week." If the rumours of Slytherin having three new chasers and a new seeker were true, Oliver wanted the match as quickly as possible before they could get used to playing with each other. As it had been his two remaining chasers who recommended the girl Bell, he was supremely confident she would be very good.

Minerva had originally suggested a friendly match but the three directors of PMP had wanted to cut their teeth on a match that meant something. The Gryffindor – Slytherin match certainly fell into that category. The headmistress could already see how much her school could benefit from having this screen in their hall. The word 'bleak' could have been coined for Northern Scotland in the winter, having this form of entertainment would certainly keep their spirits up when it was dark from four pm until at least eight am. It also wouldn't hurt if some of her students had the opportunity to get noticed by some professional Quidditch teams, Mr Wood had already decided that was the career for him.

The buzz that was already running through the hall just increased in intensity when the headmistress announced that the first Quidditch match of the season was now less than two weeks away. This year at Hogwarts was already shaping up to be an epic one.

-oOoOo-

Harry may have a big game coming up this Saturday but that wasn't even close to being the most important day of the week for him. This year Hermione's birthday was going to be memorable, well it would be if he had anything to do with it. He was tossing and turning in his bed, far too excited and apprehensive to sleep. Harry quietly took out his mirror and activated the map function, just on the off chance that Hermione may be awake. She was in her bed, probably sleeping. Harry was randomly scrolling through the quiet castle when a certain name made him stop abruptly. He blinked a few times and rubbed his eyes to ensure they weren't deceiving him, the name was still there so Harry took action.

"Bambi, Marauders emergency. Code red, code red."

It was only a few seconds later that the faces of his father, Sirius and Remus were looking back at him through his mirror.

They all looked relieved to see he was alright. "Where's the fire son?"

"Check outside the Gryffindor dorm dad, please tell me my map has been pranked."

The sheer amount and intensity of loud swearing emanating from the marauders was enough to tell Harry that his map was working perfectly, there was definitely an intruder in the castle.

"Prancer, Padfoot, I'll get on to Amelia right away. She'll have a team of aurors there as quick as she can."

James was as angry as his son had ever seen him. "That's fair enough Remus but she'd better hurry. I'm head of Gryffindor, and if that bastard sets one foot inside my house then all bets are off."

Harry could now see his mum peering over his dad's shoulder, her wand was already in her hand and she appeared ready for anything.

Sirius was doing some serious role reversal and actually trying to calm the Potters. "Guys, I'm going to grab Filius, Pomona and



Minerva, we'll be with you soon. Keep an eye on the map and don't go charging off without us."

Sirius was off the mirror as well, leaving all three Potters watching the dot that was Albus Dumbledore walking in front of the Gryffindor entrance.

-oOoOo-

Albus was having no luck trying to convince the Gryffindor guardian he needed access to her house. The Fat Lady was a mere painting and could never understand the concept of the greater good, Albus simply must speak with the Potter boy. Subconsciously he was enjoying having a conversation with someone who wasn't his elf but the entire process was taking far too long. Every second he remained visible increased the risk of a portrait or ghost reporting his presence to Minerva. He noticed lights out the tower window, lights that were making their way to the castle, it was time to leave. Becoming invisible once more, Albus began making his way to his preferred exit.

-oOoOo-

Remus was accompanying Amelia and the eleven aurors she managed to grab on her way here. With his mirror active, the marauder was able to tell them Dumbledore was on the move and steer the group on an intercept course. Sirius was coordinating the other group as James' eyes never left his mirror and signalled directions.

The head of Gryffindor was now grinning like a maniac, with Remus leading Amelia and the aurors from the other side, Dumbledore was trapped. James was mentally preparing himself for the battle that was sure to follow when the unthinkable happened, Dumbledore disappeared off his mirror.

With a loud cry of 'no', he led the charge into the now empty corridor, the group of professors were soon joined by the equally baffled aurors. They began casting detection charms up and down the empty corridor. Since it only contained one tapestry, that task didn't take long.

Harry's worried voice drew James out of his puzzlement. "Dad, how could he disappear off the map like that? I thought it was impossible to apparate inside Hogwarts?"

James attempted to reassure his son. "It is Harry, he must have entered a secret room or passage that's not on the map. Dumbledore attended Hogwarts for seven years as a student and then over forty on the staff, he probably knows this castle better than anyone else."

His son's next words sent a chill right through his body. "Dad, that means he could be anywhere?"

Sirius was already moving, with Lily hot on his heels, before James could answer his son. The Slytherin dorms were a long way from the seventh floor corridor they were on at the moment.

"Stay put Harry, your mum and Sirius are on their way. Both will stay there until we decide what we're going to do next."

Amelia was approaching with Remus and asked them both a question she needed answered. "Is there any chance those things could be wrong?"

"The maps have never been wrong in all the years we've used them, they're tied in to the castle's own magic. Not even polyjuice potion could fool these."

Minerva came butting in at that moment. "The mirrors weren't wrong, the Gryffindor guardian portrait just confirmed to me that Dumbledore was exactly where the map indicated. She couldn't desert her post to inform anyone before he left, the Fat Lady reported Dumbledore claimed it was imperative she let him pass but wouldn't give a reason. She thinks he saw something out the window and then disappeared."

That fitted what little facts Amelia had. "He might have spotted our lit wands as we made our way up to the castle."

James had other fish to fry though. "Minerva, Harry brought up the very valid point that Dumbledore could now be anywhere, inside or outside the castle. I don't think we can just leave all the students lying in their beds with an intruder spotted inside Hogwarts."

"I agree, Amelia? If we get all the children inside the great hall, could you supply aurors to guard them while we search the castle from top to bottom? I know those maps are saying he's not here but I still want the castle searched, if only for my own piece of mind."

The plan of action was quickly agreed upon and set in motion.

-oOoOo-

The portrait of his beloved sister swung closed behind Albus. Those lights coming toward the castle might have been nothing yet he wasn't prepared to take any chances. With the Potter boy now in the castle, it was only a matter of time before Voldemort made his reappearance. Now was not the time to be careless and get caught.

Albus wouldn't even take the chance of his brother knowing about him being here, Abe was still snoring from the sleeping spell he'd been unknowingly placed under. Albus would find out later today from Kitty if anything strange happened in the castle, the Fat Lady would surely tell Minerva that he had been in the castle so security would be increased for a while. Tonight had taught him one thing though, he really craved more company than Kitty. It may only have been a conversation with a portrait but that was easily the most excitement Albus had in the last decade. He desperately needed someone to talk to, and already had a certain someone in mind.

-oOoOo-

Hermione found herself woken by Lily and being told to put her house coat on, she also noticed the rest of the girls were being roused. She wasn't really listening to anything else as Hermione could now sense Harry's anxiety. Cursing having to sleep so far away from him, she was first out the dorm. Susan was right behind her as they headed down to the common room where the boys were already waiting on them. She raced straight into Harry's open arms and allowed him to hold her for a minute before asking any questions.

"You any idea what this is all about?"

"Yeah, I couldn't sleep so I was just toying with my map when I noticed an intruder. Albus Dumbledore was hanging around the

entrance to Gryffindor house. I called in an emergency and they organised Aunt Amelia to come running with a squad of aurors."

The entire common room was now hanging off Harry's every word. "The staff and aurors had him boxed in a corridor when he suddenly disappeared off the map."

Hermione got there just as quickly as Harry had. "But that means he could be anywhere?"

"I know, that's why they're moving us out of here. We're heading for the great hall and will probably spend the night there. The aurors are going to watch over us while everyone else searches the castle."

The whispering started after that, filling in those who were late coming down to the common room. Tracy though asked the question that was on everyone's lips.

"What do you think he was doing there?"

Susan was again quickest with her quip. "Well I think it's safe to say he wasn't there to tell Oliver Wood the Slytherin Quidditch team line-up."

Pansy was scandalised at this. "How can you joke at a time like this? Didn't Hermione just say this madman could be anywhere?"

Susan just shrugged it off. "I'm not worried, my aunt is here and I'll bet the Longbottoms won't be far away. We've also got the Potters, the Blacks and Uncle Remus would have come running too when Harry shouted for help. That's more than enough to take care of Dumbledore."

There was more Slytherins than Pansy now looking at the girl with shock clearly etched on their faces. Neville happened to agree with Susan and said so.

"If Dumbledore is this all-powerful wizard then where has he been for the last ten years? He's obviously been hiding and trying not to be caught."

Harry added his weight to the argument. "Uncle Frank was part of the auror detail and Uncle Remus was using his map to guide them right to the target. Dumbledore ran away."

Sirius and Lily came back into the common room with the last of the stragglers, they then confirmed Harry's facts from earlier that they would be heading for the Great Hall. The entire house then found two aurors waiting on them to provide an escort, some of the Slytherins were beginning to see just how well informed the group of four first years were.

Two professors and a pair of aurors made everyone feel just that bit safer, dispelling a lot of their apprehension. Harry and Sirius both had their mirrors out, with the other three soon joining them. A running commentary was then provided to let the others know what was happening in the castle.

"Uncle Remus is with the Hufflepuffs."

"Nev, you're dad's with the Ravenclaws"

"I assume most of the names we don't know amongst the Gryffindors are aurors?"

"Makes sense Hermione, that's where Dumbledore was trying to get into. My dad, the headmistress, Aunt Amelia and about half a dozen aurors should be enough to see off any attack."

Slytherin house was getting used to these four being smart but showing it after being woken in the middle of the night was a bit much.

They arrived in the Great Hall to discover that the house tables had disappeared, they had been replaced by hundreds of purple sleeping bags. Their head of house led them over to where Slytherin table would normally be and began bedding them down for what was left of the night.

Harry grabbed Hermione and pulled her into a little alcove for a moment of privacy, he really didn't want an audience for this.

"Hermione, the reason I couldn't sleep was because I couldn't wait to wish you a happy birthday."

She giggled and held him close. "Oh Harry, well it's certainly after midnight so it's my birthday now." Hermione stopped giggling when she realised he was shaking. "Harry, what's the matter?"

"Hermione, I think it's time. I've been doing a lot of studying and found out that when I turned eleven I could ask you to be mine and wear a promise ring. It's been really hard to wait but I also promised to ask you on your birthday."

"I read that book too. It also said you had to ask my father's permission first."

"I know, you have no idea how terrified I was asking Uncle Dan if I could marry you when we leave school."

Hermione's eyes were now moistening. "You actually asked my dad?"

"Hermione, I would face a mountain troll if it got me your hand. Not that Uncle Dan was all that bad, he did sit me down and ask me my intentions toward you though. I think he was having a bit of fun with me too. He asked me what my prospects were and if I could keep you in the style you've become accustomed to."

Hermione knew she would be having words with her father later for torturing her Harry but, at this particular moment, all her attention was focused on the boy in front of her. "Harry, receiving a promise ring from you would easily make this the best birthday of my life."

Harry now had a wide smile on his face as he removed a ring box from the pocket of his house coat. He opened the black velvet box to reveal a thin platinum band, encrusted with a single row of gems that alternated between diamonds and emeralds.

Hermione was the one now shaking as Harry took her hand and slipped the ring on her finger. "Hermione Jane Granger, I promise you that this ring will one day be followed by an engagement ring, and then a wedding band. I pledge myself to you."

Hermione understood she needed to say the official words but her throat was a bit choked at the moment, a couple of deep breaths later and she was composed enough to reply. "I gladly accept this

promise ring, and all that it entails, from Harry James Potter. I pledge myself to you."

There was a slight flash as their magic accepted the promises made and then there wasn't room to get a playing card between them as they tied to hug the life out each other. The couple were drawn back into the real world by Susan's droll tone.

"Em guys, Aunt Lily is combing the hall for you and will be over here in seconds. Do what you need to do and then get out here, fast."

Harry gently kissed his intended and the now blushing couple left the alcove, they found Susan and Neville had been standing guard for them.

Susan's eyes zeroed in on Hermione's hand. Her excited squeal was probably not the smart thing to do in a hall packed with people and nervous tension, that didn't stop her though.

All eyes had instantly swivelled round to the disturbance and were now watching an exuberant Susan bouncing up and down while, at the same time, still trying to hug the couple. Neville was pounding Harry on the back in congratulations. Lily Potter was on them in an instant as the watchers waited to see what her reaction would be. Unbelievably, her reactions were almost more exuberant than Susan's. Only the squeal didn't have the same volume, it was still loud enough to be clearly heard by everyone in the hall.

Lily was gushing all over them. "Oh I'm so pleased for you two. We've known this was coming for years and Dan told us you had asked his permission. Hermione, that's a beautiful ring. James was with him when Harry picked it but was sworn to secrecy, I didn't even know what type of stones were in it."

The happy couple were soon being congratulated by all the members of their extended family who were currently in the castle before Lily brought them back down to earth.

"Right you four, we need you to get into those sleeping bags and settle down for what's left of the night. There will be aurors standing guard in the hall until morning."

They all quickly complied and none of them were surprised when Hermione slipped into the same sleeping bag as Harry, there would be no separating these two tonight.

The hall quietened down but it would be a while before Harry and Hermione fell back asleep. Hermione kept running her thumb over her new ring, convincing herself it was actually real. Harry on the other hand had somehow managed to convince himself he'd messed the entire thing up and was ready to apologise.

"Hermione, I'm sorry for asking you like that tonight. I had made plans to do it later but couldn't wait another minute..."

"Harry, please don't fret. It was perfect."

"I know it wasn't perfect..."

"Ok, I'll give you that. To be perfect, my mum, dad, Dudley and Luna would have to have been here. Apart from that, it was perfect. Since you had no way of arranging for that to happen, then it was perfect for me."

"You really think so?"

"When have we ever been able to lie to each other? I'm seriously impressed you managed to keep the whole thing from me. I loved it, I love my ring and I really love the person who gave it to me."

That was all that mattered to Harry, he cuddled into Hermione.

Susan was lying at their side and noticed Pansy and Tracy staring at the couple sharing a sleeping bag. Susan was well aware Hermione's and Harry's behaviour could be considered a bit strange. Once you got to know them though, it was just two kids who wanted to be close to each other. Susan was trying to give her friends that time for people to get to know them, before they began making up their minds their behaviour was wrong.

She kept her voice down this time but made sure they heard. "What? We left the dorm so quickly Hermione forgot Paddy. She's not cuddling into me as her feet are always bloody freezing!"

This had the girls giggling, exactly the reaction she was hoping for.



A/N Thanks for reading

## Chapter 14

Dumbledore's surprising appearance saw a lot of activity in and around Hogwarts over the next few days. McGonagall though refused to change the school's plans for the weekend, she reckoned a Quidditch match was just the thing for taking the students minds of the late night intruder.

There were four first year Slytherins sitting that Saturday morning at breakfast who were far more worried about today's Quidditch match than a midnight visitor, their food was merely being shuffled around their plates as nerves played havoc with their appetites. All that tension was instantly forgotten about the moment Susan issued one of her now patent worthy squeals. She bolted straight out her seat, with Neville following on a mere second after her. Harry and Hermione swung around to see what was going on behind them, the surprise there saw Hermione squeal too. Remus and Lily were leading four people into the hall, the Grangers, Luna and Dudley.

Harry and Hermione were soon wrapped in a three way hug with their brother in all but name. Questions had to wait as Luna was finished with Susan and Neville, she now jumped on them too. Dan and Emma then got into the act, the mother squealing every bit as loudly as the redhead Professor Potter had the other night at first sight of Hermione's ring.

Needless to say, this scene was now the centre of attention in the great hall. Most of them recognised Dudley as the person who put the stuff on the screen, this gained the boy instant and almost total acceptance. There are always those though that has a difference of opinion from the norm.

Draco Malfoy had been building himself up into a strop all morning. Those particular four first years playing for Slytherin was like a weeping sore, his own exclusion from the green and silver house still hurt more than he could say. A mudblood in the Slytherin Quidditch team was bad enough but this latest travesty inside Hogwarts really pushed him over the edge. That he, a proud pureblood, was denied his rightful place at the Slytherin table was bad enough. That he had to then endure the sight of a muggle being made welcome in that hallowed place of blood purity pushed him over the edge. The red mist descended as the blond Hufflepuff made his way over to what was supposed to be his house.

"Salzar Slytherin must be turning in his grave when he sees what his once proud house has become."

Susan, as usual, was quickest with an answer. "I don't know about that Malfoy, I reckon he'll be too busy celebrating that Slytherin managed to avoid having you pull our house honour down. I know we all are."

The derisive laughter that followed that remark just fanned the flames of Draco's anger. Dudley then proceeded to douse that volatile emotion in petrol.

"Malfoy? So this is the arrogant tosser Sirius warned us about? Old Padfoot wasn't exaggerating."

Draco sensed a chance for a smidgen of retribution, he jumped on the opportunity this muggle had just handed him. "I will not be insulted by the likes of you. Let's see who's the best here, I challenge you to a duel."

Dudley replied before anyone could raise an objection. "I accept. Since you issued the challenge, I get to set the rules. Unarmed combat, no weapons or wands."

Draco was incensed. "You want me to fight like a common muggle? No way."

Dudley pinned the now concerned Malfoy with a glare that emphasised he had no intention of backing down. "You issued the challenge to a common muggle, what else did you expect? Did you honestly think I was just going to stand there and let you throw spells at me?"

From the expression displayed on his face, it was obvious to everyone witnessing this that's exactly what Draco expected. The thought of his foe actually being able to fight back never crossed his mind.

Sirius was now on the scene and attempting to quash this before it got out of hand. "Mr Malfoy, what possible reason could you have for being over here?"

Dudley could see what Padfoot was up to and intervened. "Sirius, I got this covered. He's nothing but a wannabe bully, and you know how much we hate bullies. Ok Malfoy, do you at least know the noble art of fencing?"

Draco had waved a sword about and battered a suit of armour into submission while growing up, there was also no way he was going to let this muggle think he couldn't do something. "Of course I can, I'm a pureblood."

Dudley's smile was predatory as he turned toward Harry and Hermione. "Guys, do your stuff."

The rest of the Slytherins got a taste of their star four first years true abilities as the couple transfigured a couple of knives off the table into usable blades for fencing.

James and Lily were also there now and also tried to put a stop to this. "Dudley, this isn't fair and you know it."

"An unfair advantage is one the other guy has, you taught us that dad. Malfoy here came over to this table to pick a fight with someone who doesn't have any magic. He was sure the advantage was his and would quite happily use his wand on me."

Luna actually growled at that. "Not while I'm here he won't." The look she was giving Malfoy would have any of their group who knew her hiding below the bed until Luna had calmed down.

Dudley smiled his thanks to Luna before finishing his answer. "If he withdraws his challenge, I'm prepared to shake hands on the matter."

Draco was eyeing the blades with more than a little trepidation, his anger though was still controlling his mouth. "Shake hands with a muggle? I'd rather cut my hand off first than have it touch filth like that."

Dudley hated the very thought of disappointing his parents but was not for backing down here. "Mum, dad, this is something I need to do. This fool needs to learn and it's probably better coming from me. Do you want Harry on his case after he's insulted our Hermione?"

Pomona and Minerva were now involved. "Mr Potter, Miss Granger, twenty points each for some OWL level transfiguration. Mr Malfoy, despite my low opinion of you, your behavior has me continually downgrading that opinion. No matter what happens here, you will miss today's game and tonight's screening of it. Mr Dursley is a guest in this school and your behavior toward him is despicable."

Pomona couldn't help but add her two knuts worth. "I quite agree headmistress and Mr Malfoy will have a meeting with me tomorrow afternoon. His general behavior goes against everything that Hufflepuff house stands for."

Draco appeared to think this was a good thing. "I've said from the start I'm not a Hufflepuff, doesn't that just prove it? Resort me into a more suitable house."

Minerva's demeanor would have terrified students a lot braver than Draco. "Mr Malfoy, you seem to be laboring under the misconception that the other houses would welcome you with open arms. Let me assure you that is certainly not the case. Your only alternative to Hufflepuff is where your behavior appears to be leading you, straight back home to your mother."

Minerva then turned her attention to the adults present. "Professors, I'm concerned here for student's safety. You will have to convince me otherwise or this matter goes no further."

Sirius understood Minerva just had a bad few days and was looking forward to today's Quidditch match, hoping to release some of the tension around the school. The last thing she needed was this situation. "Headmistress, the fencers will be wearing equipment that protects their head and torso. The worst that can happen is a slight cut that Madam Pomfrey will fix in moments. The only thing being injured here today is some pride."

This is what she wanted to hear. Perhaps Mr Malfoy getting bested by a muggle would knock some of the arrogance out of him, she doubted it though. No Hufflepuff had ever been expelled from Hogwarts but this boy would be lucky to see the year out.

Hearing that at worst he would receive a minor injury boosted Draco's confidence no end, his arrogance was back at full volume. "Enough talking, I'm ready whenever the muggle is."

James transfigured a couple of fencing helmets and body armour while Minerva led the two boys out to the entrance hall.

With his head and torso protected, Draco felt a sense of invulnerability. When the sword was placed in his hand, his confidence saw no other outcome but his victory. It wasn't clear whether Malfoy's temper had complete control or perhaps the highland air was having a subliminal effect on him. Either way, he charged Dudley with all the passion of a highlander at Bannockburn. His wild swipe met only fresh air though, before he was falling to the floor and screaming in pain.

Dudley had simply moved his body, while leaving his foot behind to trip the charging idiot. One flick with his blade and the duel was over, he'd drawn first blood.

There were roars of laughter at where Malfoy was injured, Dudley though was too busy being congratulated by his friends as they headed back to the Slytherin table. Greg had a question he wanted to ask.

"Why did you finish it so soon? I would have enjoyed seeing you take the piss out of Malfoy."

"Sirius taught us never to muck about in a duel or a fight, any muppet can land a lucky shot."

Susan though had her mischievous look going full blast. "Hey Dud, you do realise you might have poisoned the ponce?"

This comment left everyone puzzled until he responded. "Ok Sue, I know I'm going to regret asking but how did you come up with that?"

Susan smiled sweetly before answering. "Well Dud, you gave his 'arse a nick"

The groans that followed were then met with a plea from Hermione. "Luna, we need you here as quickly as possible. You're the only one who can keep her in line."

"I can see what you mean. Sue, that joke really scraped the bottom. Wait a minute, wasn't it Dudley's blade doing that?"

This drew even more groans before they turned to laughter at Susan's expression.

Pansy though managed to sum up the entire house's feelings. "I can't believe there's two more of them."

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They had pretty soon discovered why the unexpected 'guests' were at Hogwarts, Dudley, Luna and Dan would be recording today's Quidditch match. When the Hollyhead Harpies captain, Gwenog Jones, then appeared to co-commentate with Lee Jordan, the school began to get some idea of just how historic this match was going to be.

The excitement of that afternoon's game was at least matched by arriving for dinner and seeing all the famous guests there. Word had gotten around about what was actually taking place here tonight and the guests now accounted for a who's who of British Quidditch. Even the minister of magic had turned up uninvited, no one was going to throw him out for not having a ticket.

Dudley and Luna were now probably more nervous than their four friends were before the match. Dinner was soon finished and McGonagall stood to announce the main event.

"I would like to welcome all our guests here tonight and wish PMP all the best for this venture. If their broadcast manages to capture even a tenth of the atmosphere and excitement of today's match, I'm sure they'll be on to a winner."

Remus, Lee and Gwenog were the only ones who had actually seen the footage, all were confident that they could easily surpass the headmistress' expectations.

Omnioculars were the recognised way of recording small parts of Quidditch matches, the Marauders were just about to change that forever. Dan, Luna and Dudley used modified versions of these to record the actual match but there was one main difference. The Omnioculars sent the signal to a recording crystal that Remus controlled. All three signals would be on the screen at the same time. Dudley was concentrating on the quaffle and his feed occupied the

lower half of the screen. Dan's task was to concentrate on the seekers, with his images being located on the top right hand quarter. Luna had more of a roving commission and was transmitting crowd reaction, beater battles and background shots, she had the top left portion of the screen. With a simple touch, Remus was able to have one portion become the full screen, two taps and it replayed the last twenty seconds to the entire screen in slow motion.

As Lee and Gwenog were watching Remus' control screen, they were able to comment in great detail about what just happened during the replays. The whole thing was being copied to the recording crystal for playing back later. With all three recording from different stands, the overall effect was better than they could possibly have hoped for.

Dan and Emma were sitting beside Sirius in the Slytherin stand, both were quickly accepted. That they were wearing Slytherin Quidditch jerseys with Granger on the back certainly helped. Dudley was with James in the Gryffindor stand while Luna sat between Lily and Amelia amongst the Hufflepuff contingent.

They had rehearsed what they would record for the opening and then it was fly by the seat of your pants time.

Lee Jordan became the first person to speak on PMP coverage of Quidditch as Luna focused in on the presenters. "Good afternoon everyone and welcome to the first Quidditch match of the Hogwarts season, Gryffindor versus Slytherin."

The roars inside the great hall were probably louder than those at the stadium earlier, James and Sirius felt some of the knots in their stomachs begin to untie.

"I would also like to welcome my beautiful co-presenter for this match, Hollyhead Harpies captain Gwenog Jones."

The cheers this time were certainly peppered with wolf whistles, they quickly died down as everyone wanted to listen to the big screen version of Gwenog. "Thanks Lee and can I say how much I'm looking forward to this match today. I remember it well from my time at Hogwarts and this clash always provided an exciting game."



As Lee began to introduce the Slytherin team, Dan's feed was now on the screen. It then switched to Dudley as the Gryffindor's took to the sky.

The quaffle was tossed and the screen reverted to the three section view they would soon become accustomed to. Five minutes into the game when Hermione scored the first goal, the crowd erupted as the slow motion action replay filled the screen. James and Sirius were on their feet, jumping about like teens with Remus dragged into the middle. The vast majority of this audience had watched this game as it was played earlier yet were clearly loving seeing it again, even knowing the eventual outcome didn't daunt their enthusiasm.

As the match ebbed and flowed between the teams, the Marauders were far more interested in observing the watchers, they had a lot of prestige riding on the outcome of this. It was easy to see that the audience wasn't too bothered about the mistakes made by the recorders, or even that their team was going to win /lose, they were just enjoying the whole experience.

The Gryffindor chasers were good, but the Slytherins were awesome. They were, smaller, lighter and on faster brooms, the Gryffindors simply couldn't catch them. Oliver Woods was playing a blinder but even he couldn't stop them pulling ahead. The Weasley twins were great beaters but the Slythering pairing wasn't bad either, the new brooms Sirius had provided evened them out to stop either set of beaters having a significant effect on the outcome of the match. When Harry pulled off the move Malfoy had attempted during their flying lesson, the entire school could see who would win the battle of the seekers. That McLaggen had just poured on speed and followed Harry into the dive saw him eating grass for his efforts.

The score was ninety - sixty in favour of Slytherin when Harry once more went into his dive, the other seeker's hesitation to follow was understandable, but also costly. Remus had been watching Harry since he learned to fly and knew this was for real, the entire screen was now taken up by the Slytherin seeker as he chased the snitch. By the time McLaggen responded, Harry was raising the little golden ball in the air, seconds before being hit by his Slytherin teammates in celebration.

The entire hall was now on its feet applauding like mad. This applause was not for the Slytherin victory, rather the achievement and ingenuity of what they'd just watched.

The Quidditch professionals in the audience had realised within the first ten minutes this system could revolutionize how their game was seen in the future. It also soon became apparent that this would be a fantastic training tool. A coach could scream until he was blue in the face and not get his message across, being able to show a player exactly what he was doing wrong would be worth a fortune.

The entire day had went a long way to pushing the memory of the intruder in the castle out of the children's minds, they were now full of more important things like Quidditch.

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Xeno had been at the match and this evening's presentation in his role as editor of the Quibbler, he of course brought Maia. The Longbottoms had been on duty while Augusta and Aurora had both children at the match. All the adults of the extended family ended up back in the Potter's quarters to celebrate their achievement today while Sirius had arranged for another two beds placed in his first year dorms. They all had seen how much the group of kids had missed being together so they would be staying the night, and the Grangers were going to use the spare room belonging to James and Lily.

It was a mark of how far things had come when a muggle could spend the night in Slytherin and find himself welcome. The group of friends quickly and effortlessly integrated Dudley and Luna into their house. Luna especially was delighted with this, since she hoped to be in this year group next September.

The other Slytherin first years were surprisingly fascinated by Dudley. Here was a muggle who was not only aware of the magical world, but embraced it and was carving a place for himself in it too. He traveled here today by Portkey and had flown as a passenger on a broom. Dudley, by his very presence, showed them what was possible in the future.

Minerva was having a quiet chat with the minister in her office. After having got her Dumbledore enquiry out of the way, she asked Barty what he thought of tonight's presentation.

The minister took a moment to consider before answering. "I think those three men are amassing power and influence that Voldemort or Dumbledore could only dream of."

"You better explain that answer Barty before I get angry and throw you out my office."

"Minerva, my son was only a couple of years younger than them, you have no idea how many times I've wished Barty would have chosen his friends more carefully."

This placated the headmistress for now, but she was still waiting for an explanation. She wasn't quite prepared for the one she got.

"Voldemort wanted to mould our society to his image, using murder and terror to try and achieve his goal. Dumbledore had a different image with a different method, he manipulated people and events to form his vision of what he thought our society should be."

Minerva had no problems with what she was hearing so far.

"The public face of PMP is a werewolf, and we willingly accept this." Barty had to put his hand up to stop Minerva interrupting him. "This evening I watched a muggleborn playing Quidditch for Slytherin, and we accepted this. Tonight, a muggle is staying in the Slytherin dorm, and it's accepted he'll be welcomed there."

Minerva couldn't hold back any longer. "Barty, you're saying that as if it's a bad thing, I personally think it's a giant step forward for this school, and hopefully our society."

"Minerva, I agree with you one hundred percent. Answer me this though, how did those changes come about? You will find those three at the forefront of every one."

Now she was beginning to understand. Minerva was living with this day to day, it was only when you stepped back that you could see the strides being made.

"There is not one doubt in my mind, what we witnessed here tonight will change the way we live our lives. Anything that can bring excitement like that into our very homes is going to be a massive success. What seals it for me is they are using wizarding technology to mimic muggle developments. If they were copying muggle equipment and making it work with magic, they would face a backlash from sections of our community."

Minerva could see some of the more extreme purebloods objecting to anything muggle on pure principle. Quidditch recorded on Omnioculars, copied to a magical crystal and watched on a mirror would be instantly accepted.

"I also understand it was one of their products that alerted us to Dumbledore being inside the castle? He easily got around the Hogwarts wards and locked doors but didn't know about that system?"

"Yes, there is now a dedicated alarm built into the monitors James, Sirius and Remus carry at all times. Should Dumbledore enter the castle again, we will know at once."

"As I suggested earlier Minerva, these young men now have tremendous respect, power and wealth in our society. The methods they used to achieve these goals are also to be applauded. They show us what is possible without forcing anyone to accept a certain set of beliefs. If they can get this prototype system of theirs into production, in a few years there won't be a wizarding home in Britain without one. That isn't manipulation, merely very good business."

When Minerva considered the damage that Voldemort and Dumbledore had done, she had to agree with Barty. The marauder's methods were certainly preferable, and their results weren't too shabby either.

"I applaud what they've achieved, and the methods used. I feel they are the greatest hope for our society. I can't tell you how much it pleases me that they are teaching at Hogwarts, hopefully passing on their wisdom to the next generation. I actually envy you Minerva, you get to play your part and witness the changes firsthand."

Minerva was now slightly embarrassed for jumping down the minister's throat earlier. "These changes are only possible because

of the reforms pushed through the ministry by your government Barty. Clearing out the death eaters left us all breathing cleaner air."

"I won't consider the job done until Dumbledore is dealt with, only then will I relax and perhaps consider retirement."

The last statement really knocked Minerva for six. "Surely you jest Barty? You are the best minister we've had in generations."

Barty was really off guard tonight and replied honestly. "I worked my entire life to become the minister for magic, only for my world to fall apart as I achieved my dreams. My son died just before my appointment, and Victoria soon after. Once I've gotten Dumbledore, I feel all debts have been paid and I can step back from public life."

Minerva could see the minister meant what he said.

"I'm tired of playing the game Minerva, and I think our society is going to be in good hands. I haven't enjoyed myself in years as much as I did tonight, perhaps I could get a PMP system as a retrial presentation? I think though it was all the company that made it so special tonight, children's laughter is good for the soul."

Minerva smiled as she wholeheartedly agreed with that last statement. "Well Barty, you're welcome back at Hogwarts anytime. I'll send you an owl when the next game is being broadcast."

This actually drew a smile from the stern man. "I'd like that Minerva, I'd like that a lot."

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At breakfast next morning, Dudley was probably the most popular student inside Hogwarts. To those with a muggle background, he was their link to a world they didn't see for ten months of the year. He received many requests for what should be broadcast on the screen. To those of a magical background, this was no ordinary muggle. Here was the person who would help bring professional Quidditch right into the great hall of Hogwarts. After watching how the system worked with a school game, they couldn't wait to see how the pros looked close up and in slow motion replay.

Dudley and Luna had slotted right back into the way the six had always been, this finally dispelled any lingering doubts that the separation would affect their relationships with each other. They all walked with Remus and the Grangers to the edge of the wards, Luna was staying in Crawley tonight.

Dan and Emma were hugging the four staying behind for all they were worth, they also missed their house filled with the laughter of children. There were no tears though as the port key took half the group away, their mirrors would keep them in touch until they got together again at Christmas. The four young Slytherins walked back to the castle, they'd had quite the weekend.

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Severus Snape was also having quite the weekend, his first outside Azkaban in almost a decade. The little cottage at Spinners End was not in the best of shape but it was a virtual palace compared to his recent accommodation. Just the absence of Dementors was enough for Severus to almost break out in a smile, almost.

With what little money he had squirreled away, Severus had managed to purchase some potions ingredients in order to improve his health. Being able to brew a potion again was certainly improving his wellbeing, he just needed to get better fast. Severus had seen what was happening inside Azkaban and was amazed he made it out alive, Barty Crouch was certainly one to hold a grudge. His aim now was to get well enough so he could then get as far away from Britain as possible, this potion would be the first step. Severus almost spilled the cauldron when he heard the voice behind him.

"Oh Severus, what have they done to you my boy?"

"Albus? What the fuck are you doing here?"

"You didn't think I would forget about you now, did you?"

In the last ten years, Severus had probably been as lonely and had as little human contact as Albus Dumbledore. That didn't mean he was keen to catch up on old times with his former headmaster.

"Just you being here could see me back in Azkaban by tonight..."

"Don't worry my boy, no one else knows about your little love nest. We'll be safe here..."

"We? What the fuck is this we? There is no we!"

"Now Severus, calm down. We have work to do."

The newly released prisoner was in shock at the old fool's audacity. Albus took this silence as agreement and continued with his ravings, he really didn't require much encouragement.

"With both the Potter and Longbottom boys now in Hogwarts, Voldemort is sure to make a play for them. Even without the prophecy, he'll want to kill both boys. We need to be there..."

Severus regained his voice and used it to try and force some sense into the old wizard. "The dark lord is dead. I was there and saw him destroyed before I passed out, he's not coming back no matter who is at Hogwarts."

"Oh Severus, don't be so naive..."

"Naive? Oh I was certainly naive, that's how I ended up between two manipulative bastards. I spent ten years in Azkaban because of that naivety. Those ten years totally cured me of that affliction. Take whatever scheme you're working on and get out of my house."

"But Severus, you must help me..."

"Must? The only thing I must do is get out of this country, and away from you. Get out of my house before I call the aurors myself."

Dumbledore now wore an expression more akin to that of a child who just watched a hippogriff eat their puppy. "Severus, you've changed?"

"Azkaban will do that to you. I consider myself lucky to get out of there alive, and have no intention of ever going back there. Get out of my house!"

Dumbledore attempted to leave with some dignity. "I shall say goodbye for now and give you a few days to think this over. I understand how hellish that place can be but I'm also sure you are

strong enough to recover, becoming once more the wizard that you were."

Severus tried one last time to get through to the deluded old bastard. "Albus, that Severus Snape is gone for good. I hope to rebuild my life but it won't be in Britain, just like we will never meet again. This really is goodbye."

Watching him leave, Severus now knew he had to bring forward any plans he had. The house would have to be sold and any money raised forwarded to him. If word that he had met Albus Dumbledore got out, the former prisoner of Azkaban would be reunited with the accommodation he'd just left.

Severus had no way of knowing that he was already too late. The Daily Prophet's chief reporter had spotted Severus Snape slinking into the apothecary, Rita didn't get to be chief reporter without taking a few chances. Severus had returned home with a stowaway clinging to the back of his robes and the small beetle had taken a vantage point that allowed her to witness the entire scene that just unfolded.

Originally she had been delighted to discover the death eater had a home that had escaped the goblins' notice, thinking what a fine story that would make. Now, that information was a mere footnote in a much more explosive piece.

That Dumbledore should appear was a gift from the gods, a gift Rita fully intended to share with the entire country. Add to that, the crazy old coot's apparent reason for breaking into Hogwarts last week and she was mentally composing her acceptance speech for her golden quill award. Throwing in the names Potter and Longbottom would grab even more attention.

The magical community of Britain was well aware these two families were very close, along with Bones they apparently made up almost half of this year's Slytherin Quidditch team. Bring in the whole PMP angle and these revelations could rock their world.

Rita was glad she was in here beetle form as it suddenly struck her that the stupid old wizard must have thought both boys were in Gryffindor, she wanted to roll about with laughter as headlines formed in her head.



'Albus Prowling at Wrong Boys' Door' would do for now, her boss wasn't the only one who could have fun with dopy Dumbledore's name. She just needed this death eater to leave the room before making her escape. Rita Skeeter had a story to write, and what a story!

A/N Thanks for reading

## Chapter 15

Peter White was expecting a visit from the ministry today, he was not expecting the Minister of Magic to practically kick his office door in.

"You egotistical, headline-grabbing arsehole!"

"So you're not here to thank me then?"

"Thank you? I should have Amelia here arrest both you and Skeeter."

Peter noticed the Head of the DMLE appeared just as angry as the minister, he ditched any cockiness and was already verbally backpedalling. "On what charges were you planning on arresting us? Informing the public of what's really going on is our job."

It was a raging Amelia who came right back at him. "Arresting criminals is mine. We've been after Dumbledore for ten years, and you just blew the best chance we had of catching him. Had you come to us with the information before printing, we could have staked Snape's house out. Now Dumbledore won't come within a hundred miles of the place."

"Excuse me for interrupting but I have some business with the editor too." Remus marched right up in front of Peter's desk and slapped a scroll onto it. "This is the cancelation of all advertising and any contact with PMP and the Daily Prophet, effective immediately."

Peter was shocked, this accounted for about eight per cent of their advertising and the editor was really worried it could be the first of many.

Amelia though didn't appear in the slightest surprised at this action from PMP, only at who was carrying it out. "I half expected James to beat us here?"

"Lords Potter, Black and Longbottom demanded, and got, a meeting with the paper's owners." Remus then proceeded to let Peter know just how much trouble the Prophet was in. "Dumbledore broke into Hogwarts and didn't even know what house the two boys were in."

You not only provided him with that information, you printed pictures of Harry and Neville so he could recognise them instantly."

As expected, Amelia backed Remus. "You do know that Neville's parents work for me? You and your paper have endangered an auror family with that article, with the ministry and those three lords pushing charges I'm sure we could make something stick."

Peter was now sweating. It was one thing to claim freedom of the press but apparently he'd seriously pissed off the wrong people. This wasn't the Voldemort era though, he wouldn't be waking up to his house on fire with the floo, windows and doors sealed. That didn't mean these people couldn't break him professionally, politically and financially, he also sensed that's exactly what they intended to do here.

In his rush for a headline, he'd made a serious error of judgement. Had he played ball with the ministry, the Prophet would have been granted front row seats at Dumbledore's capture. Now he might have the inside edge on interviewing the old wizard in Azkaban, as a fellow prisoner.

"Ok, what can we do to help repair some of the damage?"

Remus was first to answer. "As far as PMP are concerned, nothing. Our decision stands. You might also be getting a visit from the Hogwarts headmistress, after endangering two of her students."

The marauder was finished with Peter but had a few words with Amelia before he left. "Lily's first instinct was to pull the children from the castle, another reason why Mr White here might be hearing from Minerva today. There's a family meeting in Hogwarts tonight to discuss what we do next, hope you can make it."

Amelia was well aware that anyone attacking Harry or Neville would find her Susan and the rest of their friends standing beside the boys, this incident affected the entire extended family. "I'll do my best to make it Remus, this is going to be one hell of a day though."

As Remus left, the two ministry officials once more turned their attention back to Peter. Barty wasn't giving the editor any choice in the next matter. "The last of the death eaters will be released later this week, here is what we are going to do..."

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Sheila was wary of this rat. She understood why they wanted it tested, repeated applications of poison at its previous location had little effect on the creature. Only by its constant twitching was there as any sign their product got to the rodent at all. Even the anaesthetic didn't seem to knock it out completely. A breed of rat that could resist the latest rodent control methods had her bosses worried, they were waiting on the results of this sample.

The creature was currently sedated in the containment cabinet as the lab technician slipped her hands into the gloves, ready to take the blood sample. As the needle entered the rat's body, all hell let loose.

A loud scream of terror was followed by the rat transforming into one of the sorriest looking men Sheila had ever seen. Considering some of the men she'd dated, that was really saying something. The individual was trapped inside the cabinet and the now terrified technician barely had time to get her hands free of the gloves before beams of light started shooting out the cabinet.

Sheila ducked down and crawled along the floor before taking refuge under a desk, the shocks weren't over for the morning though as three people wearing identical robe-like clothing suddenly appeared out of thin air. There were more beams of light before silence once more returned to the lab. Sheila was hunkered under the desk thinking she certainly wouldn't forget today in a hurry, the muggle lab technician had no idea how wrong she was.

-oOoOo-

Barty strode through the ministry with his face like thunder, if he got any angrier then lightning bolts would probably shoot from his eyes. He'd just left St Mungo's where his top medical experts had informed him that Peter Pettigrew could never stand trial, that wizard simply didn't exist anymore.

The person currently under guard in a secure room didn't know who Peter Pettigrew was, the individual was totally insane. From what they could gather, Voldemort was responsible for this by overuse of torture before he left to meet his fate that night. The creature once

known as Peter Pettigrew had been living as a feral rat for the last ten years. Only his body's defence mechanisms had forced him to become human again, the magic that had shot from his wand was neither structured nor focused and he had easily been subdued by the aurors.

Barty well remembered many confessions of what Voldemort did to those followers who displeased him. Peter had delivered the Potters on a silver salver but Voldemort had allowed them to escape again. Peter had paid a heavy price for his master's failure. The Minister was more concerned at Pettigrew reappearing now, Barty really didn't believe in coincidences.

The healers had assured him Pettigrew didn't know what year it was, far less his own name. It seemed like this was one of those instances where it really was pure coincidence.

He strode purposefully toward his destination, and baulked when he entered the interview room. Severus Snape was barely into his thirties yet physically had the appearance of someone who was nearing retirement, that after having spent their adult life working incredibly hard. Having just left Pettigrew and to be now faced with this scene, for the first time ever Barty thought he'd made the correct decision that day with his son. The alternative was clearly horrible as he gazed at his second broken wizard this morning. This thought touched something so deep inside Barty that the minister thought he'd lost it many years ago, compassion.

Looking at the shattered and sobbing remains of the wizard before him led the minister to reach a decision he no longer thought he was capable of.

"Snape, it is already clear from the evidence we have that you in no way sought out, or wished to be contacted by, the wanted criminal Albus Dumbledore. I am also informed you have cooperated fully with this investigation into your former headmaster's whereabouts."

Severus couldn't believe what he was hearing, the slightest glimmer of hope began to grow in his heart.

"You still however were discovered associating with a wanted criminal, this clearly breaks the terms of your release from Azkaban and will earn you further punishment."

Severus began crying again as the small flame of hope was cruelly extinguished.

"Severus Snape, your punishment will be your exile from the British Isles. You have twenty four hours to leave the country, failure to do so will result in your immediate and permanent incarceration on the island of Azkaban. Re-entering the country will also see you meet the same fate, do you understand?"

Severus could only nod, his vocal chords refused to work at the moment.

"Good, this better be the last time we meet." The minister then addressed the aurors in the room. "Get him cleaned up and then throw him out of here. If he's not out the country by this time tomorrow, chuck his sorry arse back into Azkaban and throw away the key."

Watching the death eater's reaction to his words was pitiful, Barty had to get out of there.

-oOoOo-

Pansy had trouble believing how unaffected her friends were with this morning's Prophet, the professors appeared much more upset. She approached Hermione as they left potions to discover if it was bravado or they really didn't care.

"Aren't you worried that Dumbledore was in the castle looking for Harry and Neville?"

She shook her head in answer. "Concerned, possibly - worried, no. Our Uncle James and Uncle Sirius were one of the top auror teams the ministry had, Neville's parents are the other one. Aunt Amelia is the head of the department, they'll look after us. Aunt Lily is also scary with a wand in her hand and only a fool would cross her or Aunt Aurora."

Susan had been listening and added her agreement. "You saw how quickly they responded when Harry raised the alarm that night? If Dumbledore hadn't run away he would be in Azkaban by now. He's a nutter that you can't let dictate your life. With the Potters and

Blacks here, Hogwarts is probably the safest place for the guys at the moment."

Hermione was now nodding as she rounded up what they felt. "You need to also remember Dumbledore didn't gain access to the Gryffindor dorm, the castle stopped him. If he sets one foot inside Hogwarts we'll know. If we're in our dorm we stay put, otherwise it's head straight for the Potter or Black rooms."

They had also been joined by both boys, and most of their year group as Harry explained Hermione's last comment. "Our mirrors now have an alarm function on them that will warn if the crazy old wizard comes back. If we say move, then it's time to get out of there."

Hermione slipped her arm possessively around his waist and attempted to relieve some of the tension that the Prophet had caused. "You don't need to worry dear. I'll be right beside you." She held her other hand up and theatrically inspected her ring. "There's no way you're getting away from me now Potter!"

They traipsed off to transfiguration and James was surprised and delighted to see a giggling group of students enter his class. He really couldn't be prouder of the kids for the way they were dealing with this. He and Sirius just had quite the morning. Getting ripped into the Prophet's owners should see the shit trickle down and drown the people responsible for having Harry and Neville's pictures in their rag. It was the urgent call to the ministry though that really shook them up.

Over the years, the marauders had all fantasised what they would do to Peter if they ever got their hands on him. Seeing that broken creature today brought home to them their former friend had suffered far worse than anything they could have come up with. The question that had always troubled them was why Peter had betrayed his friends, now they would never have an answer. His mind was so damaged the healers weren't sure that Peter even knew he was human, far less why he made a certain decision over a decade ago.

He'd eventually managed to talk Lily down from her position from when she first laid eyes on the Prophet, she wanted them all on the first plane out the country. The family meeting tonight would now focus on how to ensure the boys stayed as safe as possible, adding

the Dumbledore alarm to the kids' mirrors was the first thing they did. At least inside Hogwarts they would see the old bastard coming, and he wouldn't be getting away this time.

The corridor that he has disappeared into had now been bricked off at either end until they had more time to investigate it properly. The three marauders had also booby-trapped the now sealed part of the corridor, Dumbledore was in for some very nasty surprises if he used that route into the castle again. James got the class settled down and began the lesson. He made a mental note to ask Minerva if they could show a movie on the big screen tonight, something like a nice comedy should cheer the place up.

-oOoOo-

Barty had originally travelled to Hogwarts with Amelia in an attempt to reassure the families involved the ministry was doing everything in its power to capture Dumbledore. It hadn't taken much persuasion for him to stay for something called movie night. He sat in the great hall and, like all its occupants, he was drawn into Luke Skywalker's fight against the evil empire. Curfew for the students came and went as the fighters attacked the death star, no one made a move to leave the hall. When the death star finally exploded, so did the hall. The cheering almost shook the rafters.

The minister watched on as Minerva had the prefects escort the very happy students back to their houses, reflecting that they had just been immersed in another culture for a couple of hours and enjoyed every minute of it. Barty had originally thought these systems would sell because of the potential to show Quidditch matches, having just watched a movie he had to readjust his earlier predictions. These systems would be a phenomenon.

Minerva had also told him earlier that the screen was used to broadcast educational programmes, Barty felt as if he'd received an education tonight. He followed Minerva back to her office, these recurring late night chats were the real reason Barty would grasp the flimsiest excuse to drop into the school.

The good thing for Barty was the headmistress didn't seem to mind his frequent visits, in fact he quickly accepted an invitation to return at the weekend to watch a Quidditch match. The minister could think



of a lot worse ways to spend an evening than watching Quidditch in good company.

-oOoOo-

Like most of the school, the Slytherin first year boy's dorm was buzzing after watching the movie tonight.

Theo was heavily involved in the discussion until his comment brought a knowing smile to Harry's face. "How great were those light sabres? I would love one of them."

The other occupants of the dorm also noticed this and Greg wanted an answer. "Ok Harry, you're looking far too smug there. Spill it."

It was actually Neville, who'd been busy raking through his trunk, that provided the answer. He pressed the button on the bottom of a tube and the other first year's eyes almost popped out their heads.

Vince was the one to state the obvious. "You've got a bloody light sabre, no way?"

"Our reaction to watching the movie the first time was pretty much the same as yours tonight, Remus and Sirius designed these to provide us with more enthusiasm for our fencing lessons. You ready Harry?"

"Alas poor padawan, you are not a Jedi yet."

That was all Neville needed to hear, he sprang at Harry while their dorm mates began shouting encouragement as his initial blow was deflected by Harry's own light sabre.

Miles thought he had it easy compared to some of the prefects. He might be in charge of the largest number of first year boys in all four houses but their behaviour had so far been impeccable. That was why the noise coming from their dorm had him racing down the stairs, it sounded like a full scale riot was kicking off in there.

He burst through the door and froze on the spot. Potter and Longbottom were jumping from bed to bed while fighting with things the entire school had just watched cutting arms clean off on the big screen. It was time for action.

Harry and Neville heard the shouted 'expelliarmus' and reacted purely on instinct, both swung their bodies and their weapons to meet the threat.

Miles couldn't believe two firsties had batted his spell right back at him, his own disarming spell robbed him of his wand, throwing the prefect out the dorm and back into the landing. It was a shaky Miles who found himself being helped back to his feet by Harry and Neville.

"Sorry Miles, we didn't know it was you."

"Does Professor Black know you've got those things Potter?"

"Well, since he helped make them, I would say yes."

Neville helped the still dazed prefect with a more detailed explanation than just yes. "These are not like the ones in the film, getting hit with one of our light sabres only gives you a mild stinging hex. We use them for fencing sometimes, and some of the teaching adults would fire hexes at us."

Harry readily agreed with his friend. "Just to make sure we were paying attention to our surroundings though, that's why we reacted like we did."

Both boys waited to see if they were going to be in trouble, Miles certainly had other ideas. "Do you think he would make me one?"

This question was quickly echoed by the large audience the noise their impromptu light sabre duel had drawn, PMP might just have another item that made most of the magical teenagers' Christmas lists.

-oOoOo-

When Dumbledore finally got his hands on that particular copy of the Prophet, the old wizard was stumped at what he was reading there. A Potter and a Longbottom in Slytherin? Albus couldn't believe it, therefore it mustn't be true. Barty was a clever man who had colluded with that bastard of an editor to get the Prophet to once more print lies. They obviously wanted to get him down in the

Hogwarts dungeons, leaving both boys safe in Gryffindor tower. They were going to be disappointed.

Albus knew all about disappointment, his meeting with Severus had not gone as well as he'd hoped. First there was the shock that the broken figure before him was once a wizard who could make his pulse beat faster just by walking into a room. The pathetic creature he had seen the other night would struggle to actually have a pulse, Severus looked so emaciated.

In his dreams of retuning to prominence in the wizarding world, Albus had always fantasised that the dark haired wizard would be behind him. That fantasy shattered the instant he first laid eyes on the new version of Severus, and completely died when the former head of Slytherin opened his mouth.

He was Albus Dumbledore though and had learned to accentuate the positive in any situation, even one that seemed as hopeless as this one. If he was reading this then Albus was sure Voldemort also wouldn't miss this critical information. The Prophet had not only provided both boys' locations, it even printed their pictures so the dark lord couldn't mistake them.

Albus may have lost Severus but he could feel his date with destiny was coming closer. It would be wise though to wait until the furore his last visit to Hogwarts created died down, and also choose a different route into the castle. He needed to place monitoring charms on both boys then, when Voldemort killed one of them, Albus could come charging to the rescue. Whether he was in time to save the other boy was immaterial, providing he got there before Voldemort left the building.

He would then be proven right, and was sure he could conjure some tears to cry over the children's bodies. It would be nice to make the front pages of the Prophet in a positive light again. Dumbledore continued his day-dreaming, or planning as he called it, until the sun went down.

-oOoOo-

Cissi watched the sun come up as she stood alone on the dock. She was early but felt it was necessary as she went over what she was going to say to her husband for about the hundredth time in her

head. She'd left Grimmauld Place for the last time, Sirius was adamant that Lucius would never set foot inside any property he owned. The goblins intended to move in today and strip the house of anything they thought was worth gold, the house would then be sold.

She had a carpetbag at her feet with all her belongings shrunk and stored inside, as well as a few things for Lucius. Cissi could never forget what she felt like getting off that boat eighteen months ago, she intended to use that experience to help her husband.

The pureblood princess had been unaware that morning that she wasn't only stepping off the boat, she was walking into a whole new world. She was well aware of her husband's prejudices and had shared many of them, those same prejudices in today's magical society were nothing less than a giant millstone around your neck.

Cissi hoped she could get that message through to her husband, otherwise there would be trouble. She had no intention of ever returning to that vile place ever again. Apart from the fact she was sure she wouldn't survive another stint in Azkaban, their son would be declared an orphan and ward of the state. Even her renewed relationship with Andi wouldn't save Draco, since Sirius had expelled her from the Black family for becoming a death eater. This left Draco with no family other than Lucius and her, their son would go into an orphanage over her dead body.

She watched as the last four prisoners to be released were helped off the boat and onto the dock, the quartet now a mere shadow of the wizards they were a decade ago. Lucius was sporting long white hair with a beard to match. It was very Dumbledore-esk, especially since he now looked about the same age as the ancient wizard.

She came forward and draped a cloak over her husband's shoulders before handing him a vial of potion. "Drink this, it will settle your stomach from the journey and help you when we have some solid food later. I have a Portkey to take us out of here."

Lucius just did whatever she said with a nod at the mention of Portkey showing he understood. He didn't utter a word as they both vanished from the dock, neither noticing they had picked up a stowaway.

-oOoOo-

Draco had become a laughing stock inside Hogwarts since he badly lost the duel to the muggle, getting outperformed by every single Slytherin in all the classes they shared didn't help his continuing case to be placed in that house either. When things were at their darkest though, there was a light at the end of the tunnel. His father was being released from prison today and his mother had asked that he could leave the school this weekend to meet him.

Professor Sprout was using this event to hold over his head for good behaviour, provided he could reach the end of the week without incurring another detention he could go. The blond Hufflepuff intended to be there and would be keeping his head down all week. That he was the one who usually instigated any trouble meant that things should go smoothly for the remainder of the week.

-oOoOo-

Lucius came out from the bathroom, a shower and a shave making him feel almost human again. He'd kept a small goatee as a reminder never to get caught again. There was food on the table but it was information he was hungry for.

"Considering we're sitting in a rented apartment in Hogsmead, I assume things are bad?"

"Lucius, it's all gone. The house, land, vaults - they took it all. Between the goblins, ministry and creditors coming out the woodwork, there is hardly enough gold left to buy a decent size cottage, never mind a country house."

That he just sat down and began eating had her really worried, ranting and raving she expected. Cissi was guessing where his thoughts were turning and wanted to dissuade her husband from that course of action.

"I've tried investing some of the gold and have managed to increase our holdings but we're on the outside now, no privileged information on who is doing what. It's also now a different world, shady dealings are no longer tolerated. The ministry has really cleaned up its act, and has a large force of well-trained aurors to back it up."

"What are you trying to say Cissi?"

She hadn't intended to be this blunt but it was now beginning to look as if this might be the only way to get through to her husband. "Lucius, we picked the wrong side and paid for it. Yes we've paid dearly but we're still here and have our son to look after. He was raised by Aunt Walburga without anyone knowing and now needs his parents, both of us."

Lucius continued savouring his food for a few moments before answering. "Narcissa, what kind of example would I be setting my son if I let these bastards walk all over the name Malfoy?"

This was what she feared, Lucius was a proud man who had all his privileges stripped away. Cissi had wondered how he would cope with that. "We are still purebloods Lucius, and working together can begin to rebuild the Malfoy name. Draco is a fine son who we should begin searching to find a good match for. By the time our grandchildren arrive, the Malfoy name could be one of the most respected names in British magical society once more."

Cissi didn't really believe that, she reckoned it would take at least another generation for the Malfoy name to recover any of its former glory, she didn't think Lucius was ready to hear that at the moment though. He continued eating and she knew she was pushing it but the alternative was unthinkable.

"I have asked Hogwarts to release Draco this weekend so he can meet his father, it will give you something to look forward to."

Lucius eventually answered. "It will take at least a few days to get my strength back. I intend to use that time to familiarise myself with these changes you speak of and also meet with my son. Decisions on our future can wait until then."

Cissi nodded and hid her smile well, this was as good as she could hope for. She had been terrified that he would rush off and do something impulsive, earning a trip straight back to Azkaban.

The beetle hiding in the corner could see there was no point of hanging around here until the weekend, Rita shot out as quickly as she could but would certainly be back.

-oOoOo-

Luna was going over the charms notes she got from her friends with her mother when Dudley called on her mirror.

"Hey Luna, you want to come over and stay tonight? Remus will be picking us up tomorrow for the Quidditch match."

Luna glanced hopefully toward her mother and Maia asked to speak with Dudley. "Would you like to come over and stay with Luna tonight? Xeno and I feel it's ages since we've seen you."

She could see the consultation going on in Crawley through the mirror, and also the large smile her daughter was now wearing. The mother network were concerned about these two almost as much as Harry and Neville. It was always going to be difficult for the children to be split, and even worse now that two of them were perceived to be in danger. Maia intended to make sure these two spent as much time together as possible, she also knew Luna wouldn't mind that in the slightest.

If Dudley stayed here tonight, they could both stay in Crawley tomorrow night. The parents treated the six kids as one big family, mainly because that was the way they all thought of each other.

There was absolutely no surprise that Hermione now wore Harry's ring. Maia was also certain there wouldn't be any raised eyebrows if Luna one day wore a ring from Dudley. She'd spoken to both Emma and Lily over how they handled the obvious attraction between Harry and Hermione, their answer of standing back and closely monitoring the situation was the track she intended to follow too. That Dudley was a muggle never even entered her mind.

The boy in question giving an affirmative answer saw both Lovegood ladies smiling and Xeno leaving to collect Dudley. The pair were going to have a busy but fun weekend.

-oOoOo-

Cissi was returning from taking Draco back to the castle, his visit hadn't gone anywhere near as well as she hoped. This was confirmed the minute she walked in the door. Lucius was pacing up and down the room, his anger very near the surface.

"That is what you expect to restore the name of Malfoy to greatness? A moaning faced poncy little git of a Hufflepuff? Your aunt has ruined our son to the point where I hardly recognise any Malfoy in him."

"Yes I can see the damage my aunt has wrought, how could I not, but aren't you being rather hard on Draco?"

"My Hufflepuff son publicly engineers a confrontation with a muggle inside Hogwarts, and then proceeds to lose the duel in front of the entire school. You tell me where the Slytherin, never mind the Malfoy is in that? The only way to save him is a withdrawal from Hogwarts and then try to get Draco enrolled into Durmstrang."

Lucius noticed his wife couldn't meet his eyes, and he didn't think it was because she disagreed with what he was saying. "Am I to assume that there is another reason why our son wasn't withdrawn the instant that tatty old hat placed a Malfoy in Hufflepuff?"

Cissi understood this could be the straw that broke her husband's temper but he needed to know. "Sirius Black paid for his tuition to Hogwarts, we would probably have to apply for a scholarship if he was to go overseas."

"Are you attempting to imply we are now in the same financial bracket as the Weasleys?"

"When we buy a new home, having to pay for seven years tuition and board to another school would in all likelihood ruin us."

"What about the goblins?"

"We have nothing of value to take a loan out against and no income to pay the loan back. Sirius cast me out of the Black family so there isn't even that stipend available to us. He only paid Draco's Hogwarts fees because, he more than anyone understands what it's like to be raised by Walburga. Doing all our business through the goblins was a mistake that came back to hurt a lot of purebloods. When the ministry offered them a percentage as a finder's fee, they knew where every knut was hidden."

The explosion that Cissi had been expecting from her husband over the last few days finally materialised.



"They have stolen our homes, our heritage and our gold, that cannot go unanswered. You yourself said that this had happened to more than the Malfoys, I think it's time to band together to take back what's rightfully ours."

This was what Cissi had feared, her husband making a foolhardy attempt to recapture his glory days. She would just have to listen and then try to persuade him otherwise after he calmed down. He wasn't finished though, rather just getting into his stride.

"Our master may be gone but his cause is no less just. When we attended Hogwarts a muggle wouldn't have been allowed near the castle, far less allowed to beat a pureblood in a duel. It's time they were reminded of the old ways, I need to begin contacting some old friends..."

While his wife may have been ignoring most of this, a certain beetle was almost dancing with joy. She'd endured hours of listening to junior whine about how nobody worshiped him just because he was a Malfoy, Rita had almost given up on uncovering any dirt. This was much more promising.

She needed to uncover something as the minister was leaning on them over the Dumbledore fiasco. The Prophet's owners were also out for blood. Rita and Peter needed to ensure that the blood spilled wasn't theirs. Malfoy's would be an acceptable substitute for all parties involved.

A/N Thanks for reading

## Chapter 16

It really couldn't be said that things were getting back to normal after Dumbledore's nocturnal wander through the castle, just what constituted normal for Hogwarts was being redefined this year. A fine example of that would be a quidditch announcement that was anything but normal. Details of exactly when the first professional game of quidditch would be screened in the great hall was greeted with loud cheering, so loud that McGonagall had to signal for silence before continuing.

"As I was saying, the first game will feature Puddlemere United playing at the Appleby Arrows. What I didn't get time to say was that Appleby have very kindly invited all four house quidditch teams along to watch the match live." As hard as it was to believe, the cheering was even louder after that. It took the headmistress a few minutes more to bring the hall to order. Her rare smile now had everyone intrigued; surely there couldn't be more good news?

"Now, as the Arrows are offering our house teams such generous hospitality, I thought it was only fair that Hogwarts reciprocated in kind. Both teams, and their management, will be coming to Hogwarts on the Sunday to have lunch before watching the match with us."

Inter house rivalries meant that it was very rare when something met with the approval of all four houses. Quidditch though crossed house and sex divides, it was by a massive margin the sport of preference for witches and wizards irrespective of what house you were sorted into. Even those not on the house teams were going to get to watch the match with professional players, this was the opportunity of a lifetime. The cheering was now loud enough to shake the rafters.

Minerva let them run out of steam before sounding a cautionary note. "Hogwarts will be playing host to some of the most important players, coaches and club owners in the country. I'm also pretty sure there will be a presence from the ministry here too. I will not have anyone's bad behaviour besmirching the good name of Hogwarts, and I mean anyone. Get into mischief between now and then and you could easily find yourself eating Sunday lunch alone in your common room, do not test me on this."

Ron Weasley was certainly not the brightest student in school but even he wasn't stupid enough to risk missing out on this. A real quidditch match and getting to meet the players, ok it wasn't the Cannons but still bloody awesome! He would be keeping his head down and his mouth tightly shut. One glance over at the twins and it was easy to see their defeat from Slytherin was forgotten about, they now had a real match to look forward to. Ron had every intention of watching it with them on the Sunday.

The only case where it could be said that normal service had been resumed was Draco Malfoy once more being a total arsehole. His defeat by Dudley had subdued his bigoted rantings for a while but his father's release from Azkaban reinvigorated the horrible Hufflepuff.

Horrible Hufflepuff was actually a contradiction in terms but it was members of his own house who coined the phrase especially for their despised housemate. As much dislike as there was for Draco outside Hufflepuff, having to live in the same house as him refined that dislike to as near hatred as the house of the loyal got.

This announcement also generated much excitement with a certain four Slytherins, they would soon take steps to ensure they spent the day in the company of Dudley, Luna, Dan and probably Emma too. Wangling an invite to Hogwarts for those four guests was also high on their agenda. PMP was like the 'family business' to them, the six being for all intents and purposes raised as close as siblings. They didn't know what their futures held but involvement in the company at some level was practically guaranteed.

They could already see moves being made to involve Dan more in the developing media side of the business. If this quidditch experiment took off, it could be a whole new career for the dentist. It would also make anyone who shared Draco's views on blood purity feel sick if a muggle ended up running the coverage of whatever quidditch the watched.

It didn't take any convincing from the four first years, one quick mirror call to Prancer and Padfoot saw their plan succeed. They would assist on the day of the match and then Dudley and Luna would once more spend the night in the Slytherin dorms. The Grangers would also use the spare room in the Potters' quarters

again and then everyone would get to watch the match together on the Sunday.

Lee was also ecstatic when his head of house invited him along to the match. He was going to be in the commentary box again with Remus and would have a golden opportunity to see exactly how the professionals did the job.

Self confessed quidditch addict Minerva McGonagall was delighted with this arrangement on so many levels. There were more than a couple of her students who clearly wanted to persue a career in quidditch, she couldn't think of any other time in Hogwarts long history where they were given opportunities like this. She had withheld certain details from them that they wouldn't discover until the day of the match. They would be leaving early to get a tour of the stadium and actually meet the players before the game even started. Even Lee was going to be given a chance to take the commentry for a brief spell of the match. The headmistress was forced to be honest with herself, she was probably just as excited as her charges.

She noticed the Malfoy boy once more saunter over to the Slytherin table as if he owned Hogwarts, the headmistress was tempted to shout at the boy before he caused trouble but decided to wait and see if he took heed of her warning.

The four friends also noticed Malfoy heading for their table but, with Vincent, Greg and Pansy rising to meet the prat, they chose to ignore him. Contacting Dudley and Luna on their mirrors to make plans for getting together was much more important than the Hufflepuff halfwit.

When the spell came, it was a total surprise.

Draco was trying to talk some sense into the three purebloods. Why couldn't they understand that they should be hanging about with him, rather than the halfblood and mudblood? When Pansy laughed in his face, something inside Draco just snapped. His wand was out and the curse fired off before anyone could stop him.

Pansy would thank Professor Black later as his lessons kicked in, her body was moving without even thinking as the curse grazed her robes on its way past.

Hermione was excited at the prospect of seeing her parents and their two missing friends soon, she was chatting happily with Dudley when Malfoy's curse hit her squarely in the face.

She began to scream as her face started to swell with painful boils emerging from beneath her skin.

Malfoy was ecstatic, finally a victory. "Hey mudblood, you should be thanking me. That look is a definite improvement for you."

With a roar, Harry unleashed something from within. Malfoy found himself lifted right off his feet, flying over the Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw tables before crashing hard into the Gryffindors. He lay there like a rag doll, with an arm and leg folded into unnatural positions.

The power was radiating off Harry and he appeared determined to march over there to finish Malfoy once and for all. Neville suddenly had both arms wrapped around his friend while Susan tried to avert the disaster that was sure to happen if Harry got his hands on Draco. Luckily, she knew exactly how to divert his attention.

"Harry, not now. Hermione needs us first."

Harry turned at once to see those eyes he loved so much slowly being hidden as her face began to painfully swell. He relaxed at once and Neville released him, allowing Harry to offer comfort to Hermione. His dad was now there and gently scooped a whimpering Hermione into his arms. "We need to get our girl to the infirmary. Sue, will you let Dudley and Luna know she'll be ok. Lily is already using her mirror to inform Emma of what just happened."

There was soon a train of concerned professors and friends following on as the two male Potters headed to the infirmary, Harry holding her hand while his dad carried her.

It was left to Pomona to check on Malfoy while the headmistress investigated what happened. Since no one else had drawn their wand, she was pretty sure of what her findings would be. Minerva found the other first year Slytherins quite upset about what had just happened to their friend, Miss Parkinson was practically distraught.

"If only I hadn't moved..."

Minerva decided to end this line of thought immediately. "Then you would be the one on the way to the infirmary. You didn't fire the curse Miss Parkinson, I'm pleased to see that no Slytherins responded with their wands."

"Harry doesn't need one to deal with Draco." Millicent, like most of her house, had watched on in amazement as the little blond ponce spun arse over tit before crashing into the table at the other side of the hall. Susan had forewarned them just how powerful Harry was, today's demonstration certainly brought that point home. Her belief that Hermione was supposedly nearly as powerful was such a scary thought, and certainly one Millie hoped never to have reason to discover for herself.

As she suspected, Minerva discovered that the Malfoy boy had made his way over here to trade verbal insults. On finding himself seriously outmatched in the wit department, he'd reached for his wand. The last straw for the headmistress was, after his curse hit an unintended target, he had gloated at its victim rather than apologising. Mr Malfoy was overdue a vacation from Hogwarts.

Poppy was busy treating Hermione while Sirius pulled James away to have a quit word. "Prancer, I recognise that curse. The little shit must have learned it from the Black family library. It's supposed to make your victim's entire body swell as it produces painful boils that then burst and bleed out. Only the fact that the little shit is so weak magically stopped Hermione's face from being a real mess."

James glanced toward the girl he already thought of as a daughter and wondered how it could be much worse? Her appearance currently matched that of someone who had been stung by a couple of hundred bees.

Padfoot understood exactly what James was thinking and gave him a mental picture he was sure would see the Malfoy boy hanging from the ceiling by his ankles. "If performed properly, Hermione would have been left looking similar to someone who survived smallpox. To even consider using a curse like that against a young girl is, well he's not someone I want anywhere near our families."

Jame nodded in understanding. "I want him gone Padffoot. We both know there's no way Harry will let this go. They've been intigrating so well with their year mates, I don't want this to spoil it. I want to kill the little shit so Merlin knows how Harry's feeling."

Sirius nodded in understanding, being a parent had changed the marauder in so many ways. He knew though if that was Joy lying there, the Malfoy brat would at least be missing limbs by now. As if on cue, Minerva and Pomona entered with an unconious Draco Malfoy. Both marauders could clearly see that Harry had inflicted a fair degree of damage on Hermione's attacker, this just increased their resolve that the Malfoy brat had to go. Neither were of the opinion that Draco would actually learn from this experience, and he might not survive another encounter with either Harry or Hermione.

Sirius quickly informed the headmistress and Malfoy's head of house what the spell was Draco had attempted, both were horrified that any Hogwarts student would know such a curse, far less attempt to cast it on another student. James then forcefully presented his views on the matter.

Minerva thought for a moment before deciding if she couldn't discuss the issue with three of her heads of house, then she would be just as bad as Albus. "It was my intention to send Mr Malfoy home with a final warning, this is still the option I'm leaning toward. I am quite prepared to extend that exclusion to allow a cooling off period. I perfectly understand Mr Potter's response to the attack on his promised, and I will be taking no action against him."

The headmistress could see this was not what they wanted to hear but pressed ahead. "I plan on Mr Malfoy leaving the castle until after Christmas, I also intend to have a long talk with both him and his parents. He needs to understand that, if you deliberately provoke a dragon then you are going to get burned. I shall ensure that the entire family understands that this is his last chance. One more flaunting of the rules will see him home for good."

Minerva finally expressed what all three heads of house were thinking. "Whether Mr Malfoy actually grasps his last chance is at best debatable. As headmistress though, I feel it is my duty to give him this chance."

In all honesty, the three heads of house present thought this was a chance more than the boy deserved. They respected Minerva though so would abide by her decision. James had some further words for her to contemplate.

"You are the headmistress Minerva so the decision is yours. I would like to register my disagreement with it though. Anyone who would use a curse like that has used up any and all the chances they deserve."

Pomona agreed with the head of Gryffindor. "I intend to add sanctions of my own if the boy returns. He has shown that he can't be trusted with a wand outside of a classroom, I intend to ensure that in class is the only place he has access to his. At all other times it will be in my possession."

James and Sirius were a lot happier with Pomona's proposed restrictions, Minerva also gave them her seal of approval. If Draco wanted to start anything, he would need to do it in front of a professor or with his bare hands. James was a lot less worried about Harry punching the little shit's lights out than he was of his son blasting Malfoy through a wall.

Harry was currently a lot more focused on Hermione's health than he was concerned with revenge. He sat by her bed, holding Hermione's hand while his mum spoke to Madam Pomfrey. Both heard what she said.

"I can't really give her much for the pain just now as it would react against the potion to reduce the swelling in her face. I'm trying to prevent those boils from bursting as that might leave permanent scarring, something I'm sure Miss Granger wants to avoid. She's going to be here for the night but I'm hopeful of a full recovery by this time tomorrow, providing we don't hit any further complications."

Hermione tugged at his hand, trying to get him to move closer. Harry finally realised what she was trying to do. With her lips so badly swollen, she was having trouble speaking. With his ear pressed close, he heard Hermione whisper "Stay?"

"You don't get rid of me that easy Granger, of course I'm bloody staying." Harry moved a strand of hair from her swollen face. "Don't worry about a thing, I won't be leaving this spot until you're ready to



return with me to the Slytherin common room. I should have been more aware, I can't believe I let Malfoy get to you. I'm really sorry."

Hermione was shaking her head and he again leaned in close to hear "Accident" whispered from those swollen lips.

"He might not have aimed it at you but he was hardly sorry with the result."

Harry once more moved closer as Hermione managed to say "Bet he's sorry now."

This drew a smile from Harry as Susan and Neville were allowed in to see her. "We've only been given ten minutes, off to defence next."

Both friends understood Harry wouldn't move from Hermione's side, and Sirius wouldn't expect him to. "I let Dudley know you were alright, he was ready to walk all the way here and rip both Malfoy's arms off. I told him Harry had dealt with the problem."

"Thanks Susan, I was too busy worrying about Hermione to concentrate on anything else. He'll probably call back when they get their break at St Andrews. I don't think I'll let him see Hermione just now, he'll probably just blame himself for not destroying the little shit when they had that duel."

Hermione signalled to Sue but she just laughed. "She wants me to reprimand your use of language. Sorry Hermione, as far as I'm concerned there isn't a word bad enough to call that arse."

They were soon shoo'd out but at least they had left their bags, Harry rumaged through his before finding something he could read to Hermione. Both of them loved Dickens so he once more held her hand before beginning to read to her. "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times..."

Poppy stood with Minerva, quietly watching the young couple. "It's hard to believe such a gentle soul as Mr Potter could do that amount of damage to another student, without a wand too. I counted eleven breaks and fractures to Mr Malfoy yet Harry sits there, reading to his girlfriend and appearing as if butter wouldn't melt in his mouth."

"It's no accident that the Potter home is next door to the Grangers Poppy, those two have been protecting each other since Harry could walk. Some of the stories Lily tells would have you doubled over with laughter. They've never been parted in all that time. All four parents were really worried about them having to sleep in dorms that were so far apart, different houses for those two was never going to be an option."

Poppy understood at once what her friend was implying, it also explained the ring on Miss Granger's finger and the strange request not to throw Mr Potter out the infirmary. She still couldn't fathom her friend's reasoning for not immediately expelling the Malfoy boy, Minerva's reputation as a disciplinarian was well deserved yet this flew in the face of everything she stood for. Poppy also wasn't about to hold her opinions to herself.

Minerva felt her friend deserved an answer. "I understand why everyone is upset about this, believe me when I say I am too. Consider though our community has been failing that child since he was a toddler. Ok, his parents made some serious mistakes but Draco has suffered every bit as badly for their crimes. I remember Walburga Black from when Sirius was in Gryffindor, he had to run away and live with James when only sixteen. If anything, the woman supposedly got worse as she aged."

Both looked over at the curtains behind which they knew the blond boy was recovering. "I intend to sit him down with his parents present and explain in no uncertain terms that his behaviour will have to drastically improve if he wishes to remain here, this is his last chance. I am also aware that Sirius payed his tuition to Hogwarts, it's unlikely his family will be able to afford to school him elsewhere should he be expelled."

Poppy understood this information was given in confidence, she had no intention of repeating it to anyone else.

"With no education, little money and the male Malfoy attitude that they are superior to everyone else, I really fear for young Draco if he gets kicked out of Hogwarts. We would really be condemning him to a life of dodgy dealings and crime. Since he's not the brightest lantern in the window, I fear it would also be a rather short career. I want Hogwarts school to be able to hold its head up high and say we did our best to help the boy. We sometimes have to admit thought that's

occasionally not enough to deter the inevitable. I hope that is not the case here but can't help feeling Draco won't be in the castle by the time we reach the summer holidays."

Minerva did a quick check on the young couple before going to write a letter to the Malfoys that she wasn't looking forward to. The headmistress could easily see Harry holding the girls hand and reading to her was helping Hermione get through this. She had no problem with him missing classes today, these two were vying to be the top student in first year. That four of the top six were from Slytherin was just another anomaly this year was throwing up.

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Lucius was fit to be tied, he was discovering that more had changed during his stay in Azkaban than he ever thought possible. Not only did every member of the 'old crowd' practically run away when he even hinted at planning some revenge, his wife had point blank refused to have anything to do with matters outside the current laws. When he told her that they were purebloods and Malfoy's, therefore above these petty laws, she'd laughed in his face.

"Is that why we spent all that time in Azkaban? I swore I would never set foot inside that place again, that is one promise I intend to keep."

Then he was forced to sit there and listen to McGonagall listing his son's faults and social inadequacies. If calling someone a mudblood got you expelled in his day, there wouldn't have been a single Slytherin who saw the end of their first year. The entire world was now upside down. To make matters worse, he now had his whining son staying in this pitiful cottage that was only fit for a gardener. He was reduced to leaving the house to get a moment's peace from the useless brat. Lucius Malfoy was a seriously unhappy wizard.

He had at least managed to cultivate a few like-minded individuals who were as upset with the way things were now being run as he was. These were young men whose family name and pureblood status no longer guaranteed them a job. What right did mudbloods have coming into their world and taking their jobs? It wasn't as if they could go and compete in the muggle job market, which was the very reason these jobs had been reserved for the right type of families in the first place. Now it was all about personal merit, job

evaluation and producing results. That wasn't the way their government was supposed to work.

Lucius had spent the last few weeks planting his seeds of dissent and discord, watching them slowly but surely put down some roots. They were the elite, the purist of the pure. When they wanted something, they just took it. He was sure that three of them were ready to take this to the next big step, and the fourth member would soon be there. He was always ready, willing and certainly able anytime the dark lord wanted some muggles tortured and killed. This time Lucius intended to add some old fashioned robbery to the plan as well. Rich muggles screamed just as loud as poor ones. He planned to help himself to some of that wealth, these particular muggles wouldn't need it by the time they were finished with them.

Lucius had no way of knowing that the three wizards in question already had tracking charms on them and were under ministry surveillance, nor that the fourth potential recruit was actually an undercover auror. He also didn't know that he and his fellow convicted death eaters were entirely responsible for this all new and improved auror department. Their wealth being confiscated had funded the entire recruitment and training program. Malfoy though appeared destined to discover just how good that training was.

The former Slytherin was also totally oblivious to the presence of an animagus in the room, this animagus though intended for the entire country to know all about the life of Lucius Malfoy. That was the deal the Prophet had cut with the ministry. Rita would keep them informed of everything she discovered and they would let her be present with a photographer when they moved in for the arrest. She planned an entire series of articles from what she had overheard Lucius say. Rita Skeeter, undercover reporter had a nice ring to it.

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The large group of students who attended the quidditch match were all in raptures about their day out, telling anyone who would listen they were in for a rare treat tomorrow. What few of them knew were the little details that Remus and Dan had planned out beforehand, both would also be up for hours yet editing the program that would be watched in the great hall tomorrow.

The witches and wizards at the Slytherin table were enchanted for another reason, they had expected their numbers to be increased by two this evening, not three. Emma was babysitting for the weekend, allowing June to visit with her big brother and his friends. The three and a half year old girl was sitting between Neville and Susan, her long sandy-brown hair framing her little cherub face. Her rosy cheeks shone while June's deep blue eyes practically sparkled from excitement, but it was her bubbly voice that enchanted everyone who heard her. Since she hadn't stopped talking for at least half an hour, that was everyone at the table. The Slytherins reputation of being stoic and emotionless was really crashing into tiny pieces this term.

June, like the rest of the group, had been raised as one extended family and had really missed the four of them. She was making up for lost time though by giving a day by day account of what they had all missed, in that adorably cute way that only young children can get away with.

Her Aunt Emma though had long been immune to her charms of persuasion, the little tyke didn't get her request to sleep in the Slytherin dorm along with the girls. She did however manage to wrangle a promise from the six to take her a walk around the castle after breakfast, and to watch the game with them.

The quidditch professionals arriving inside Hogwarts caused quite a stir, that both teams had been instructed by the owners to conduct a charm offensive saw lots of autographs signed and pictures posed for.

The three marauders were nervous as the broadcast began but Dan was confident, they had a good product here. The show opened with Luna outside the stadium, welcoming everyone to the match as the crowd milled curiously around her. Dan had suggested using the kids for this as it showed they were still learning the craft of recording these events. It also paid dividends in other areas. They had arranged interviews with both managers before the match, with a strict promise that no one would mention anything about them until after the game had finished.

Susan and Hermione had handled the interviews and both managers, not renowned for their good relations with the media, chatted to the girls as if they were favourite nieces. With their guard down, they opened up a lot more than they would if they were

talking to an experienced journalist. Dan had instructed Remus on how to edit them together so they flowed from one to the other. Lee then did a short piece on the atmosphere building inside the stadium before the teams were announced and the screen then took its split role that had been pioneered at the Slytherin / Gryffindor match.

Even though every person watching the match already knew the final outcome, they were all swept up in the excitement generated by the show on the screen. Hearing both managers talk about the tactics they planned to use before the quaffle was tossed up added another dimension as the watchers got to see those very tactics in action.

News of this presentation had spread rapidly throughout the British wizarding community and Minerva had been inundated with requests to attend, unfortunately she had to turn down most of them. The minister of magic was of course here but what really intrigued her though was the request from WWN. In a first for multiple reasons, people were now listening to a radio broadcast of hundreds of students sitting down to watch a quidditch match that happened yesterday. The marauders had laughed themselves hoarse at that thought and planned to use it to their advantage in another first.

They were still struggling with a name for their system though 'Danovision' was the current favourite. Basically it was Dan's insight and vision that was driving this project, and also he got embarrassed every time one of them mentioned it. To the marauders, the second reason was far more important. At halftime, the very first adverts appeared on the screen. The advert was also dripping with Dan's influence.

They had decided to market a limited version of their mirrors, basically just linked pairs. This was a mere toe in the water to see if there was a demand for them. Dan's idea of selling accessories to the mirrors saw protective cases designed that featured pictures of quidditch teams, popular groups like the Wierd Sisters, Hogwarts house badges and even locations like Diagon Alley and Hogsmead.

That they also got free advertising on WWN was a bonus they couldn't pass up. If the buzz that the advert caused was anything to go by, they might be busy selling PMP mirror sets very soon. There was also a chant building of 'we want lightsabers' but that quickly died as the second half got underway.

The loud cheering when the snitch was finally caught wasn't confined to only the students. Both teams had thoroughly enjoyed their afternoon and numerous requests were made to the marauders for the ability to purchase a system like this. All were met by the stock answer that this was merely an experimental system and they were still ironing out the bugs.

The managers were flowing in their praise to what they had seen, and the efforts of the children who had interviewed them. Both expressed the view that this was something they would be more than happy to do again. The two clubs couldn't miss what a massive PR coup this was and, thanks to the WWN, neither did the wizarding public.

A flock of owls were soon on their way to Hogwarts with invitations from every quidditch club in the professional league. The lesser wizarding sports and games wouldn't be too far behind their quidditch counterparts in attempting to jump aboard the latest bandwagon.

These owls were passed by every available owl in Hogwarts heading to students' homes with their requests for PMP mirrors this Christmas.

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Cissi turned the radio off and attempted once more to get through to her son. "That sounded like a lot of fun. Wouldn't you rather have been at Hogwarts and part of the experience, rather than stuck here with me listening to it on the radio?"

"Hogwarts is full of muggle-loving blood traitors. I'm better off here with you and my father."

"Draco, in case you hadn't noticed, your father is hardly ever here."

She could clearly see that once more her son believed he was right, and everyone else was wrong. Cissi needed to break through this nonsense. McGonagall had made it brutally clear exactly what would happen the next time her unrepentant offspring misbehaved, Draco was on his very last warning.

"Those students are your contemporary's son. As you go through life you will find yourself working with some of them, maybe even married to one of them. To deny yourself all these opportunities over some misguided and simply stupid beliefs that your blood makes you better than them is utter madness."

Draco wanted to rage against his mother but she held her hand up to stop his tirade before he got started.

"Even when I was your age, Aunt Walburga's views on blood purity were considered to be at the extreme end of the scale. This is a different world now where those views simply won't be tolerated by our society. Your father is struggling to come to terms with this but you must, your very future depends on it."

This was too heavy for Draco to deal with himself, he would discuss it with his father next chance he got.

The young wizard had no way of knowing that his father was currently casting the cruciatus curse on a muggle for the first time in a decade. The curse lasted no more than two seconds before the aurors took Lucius and his partners in crime down hard. That the Prophet had a front row seat ensured all of magical Britain would soon be reading about just how stupid the senior Malfoy had been.

A/N thanks for reading

And Merry Christmas



## Chapter 17

Peter White thought today's Prophet would finally get the ministry off his back, and relieve some of the pressure coming from the paper's owners. The picture of Lucius Malfoy, now modeling the latest fashion in magical restraints, being led away by a couple of serious looking aurors would be a great deterrent to any of his former colleagues contemplating similar actions.

Rita's exposé would also be a reminder to the magical community that the death eater problem hadn't been completely eradicated. It was now clear that there were those for whom time in Azkaban wouldn't alter their extreme, and certainly no longer tolerable views. While those accompanying Malfoy on this raid could be classed as young and impressionable, their leader had just spent the last decade in that no star offshore resort. The Prophet was calling for Lucius Malfoy to be given the final solution, a kiss by a dementor. With Barty Crouch as Minister of Magic, Peter knew there was a very good chance that fate already awaited Lucius. By putting it in print first though, the Prophet would be ahead of the game once more and could claim a moral victory when the deed was finally carried out.

Peter had placed the Prophet at the forefront of the battle for changes in the British magical community, riding the wave of popular support for the reform measures that the ministry had pushed through. Those had been heady days and he could admit to himself they'd gotten complacent since, resulting in that disastrous report on the Dumbledore/Snape meeting. The fallout from the ministry and paper's owners was bad but the editor was shrewd enough to understand it would be the rift with PMP that could hurt the Prophet more in the long run.

The immediate financial loss of their advertising was a hard blow to adsorb yet it paled into insignificance when Peter considered the story opportunities this rift had already cost his newspaper. Peter glanced down at the magazine lying on his desk, a magazine that Peter would hardly admit to himself was in a large part responsible for the look of today's Prophet. He'd never considered the Quibbler to be a serious threat to his business before, it was after all a weekly publication, though the Prophet's editor was perfectly happy to copy the innovative designs and layouts Lovegood had pioneered. The latest issue had set mental alarm bells ringing, having just outsold

their sister publication Teen Witch Weekly. One glance at the Quibbler and it wasn't hard to see why.

Their lead story, covering PMP's recording of the professional quidditch game and subsequent broadcast to the students of Hogwarts, was on the front, back and five pages inside. Peter really had to take his hat off to Lovegood for covering all the angles, something else he was happy to tuck into his subconscious to be used later.

The live WWN radio broadcast from the Hogwarts event had certainly caught the magical public of Britain's imagination, and here was the only place they could read reports of the event, interviews with people there from students to the minister and view pictures of it. That the Quibbler also contained a full page advert for the new PMP communication mirrors just rubbed salt into the open wound that was the Prophet's lost business.

Peter considered it a major part of his remit as editor to keep his newspaper at the forefront of everything that was happening inside magical Britain, something hard to do when their society's most innovative company declared them persona non grata. It was only after studying the paper's files on PMP that it hit the editor just how big a gaff they had actually made, that and Remus Lupin's comment to Madam Bones about 'the Family' meeting gave him the clue needed. A quick crosscheck on the head of the DMLE's file supplied the final answer.

It would appear the children had all been raised practically as one large family and, with the inclusion of the Longbottom boy and Lovegood girl, it all began to make sense. The Prophet had used many column inches over the years painting Albus Dumbledore as black as any dark lord, only to then unthinkingly give this self same criminal vital information on what were apparently his two main targets. That these targets were two young boys that all members of PMP also considered family left the paper totally screwed, and its editor with no idea how to repair the damage.

The Prophet had applied for a pre-production set of their company's mirrors with the intention of publishing a review, the reply was short and not so sweet, the word 'no' was the only answer received. They would be reduced to having someone stand in line to buy a set on the day they went on sale. It could hardly be classed as innovative if

the Prophet staff were reduced to writing a review of a product that had the potential to change their world after everyone who wanted them had already made their purchase. Peter would also bet his pension that there would be a large and positive review of the product in the Quibbler at least a week before their launch, pushing Lovegood's sales figures up even more.

Peter had no idea how to proceed on this matter, he did know however that using the Prophet to attack PMP or their products would be extremely foolhardy. Messer's Lupin, Black and Potter were all very wealthy and had important political allies. He also expected these communication mirrors to be a smash hit. With that, and this new broadcasting technology PMP were pioneering, Peter expected them to rapidly become three of the most important and influential members of their society. He also thought the Blacks and Potters Hogwarts exploits as professors was nothing short of sheer genius. Where else better to conduct market research on products than a captive audience of teenagers?

With threats and bribery not viable options in this situation, it would appear his only option was to try and cajole the Prophet's way back into the good graces of PMP. Unfortunately Peter could only think of one thing he could possibly do that with, serve them up Dumbledore's head on a plate. Nothing would please the editor more than to be involved in the old goat's capture, which hurt all the more as he now realised the opportunity he threw away.

Rita was going to be getting a lot of plaudits for her undercover work on the Malfoy case, he would just have to dangle the carrot of the deserved praise she would receive if the Prophet's top reporter uncovered magical Britain's most wanted criminal. Peter would sweeten the deal by placing all the resources of the Daily Prophet firmly behind her.

Peter covered the copy of the Quibbler with Rita's next installment of the Malfoy story. With Headmistress McGonagall banning Prophet reporters from Hogwarts after endangering two of her students over that Dumbledore/Snape story, papering over the cracks was the only option Peter had available to him at the moment. Out of sight though was definitely not out of mind. He would congratulate Rita on her Malfoy achievements later, before offering up her new assignment.

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Draco was a distraught young wizard, desperately looking for some direction in his life. All his beliefs were centered around one brave and noble figure, a figure that the young wizard had been raised to believe was a freedom fighter who'd been unjustly imprisoned. The picture and story in today's Prophet destroyed that cherished myth once and for all. His father had been arrested after casting an unforgivable curse on a muggle, muggles they were there to rob. No noble pure blood cause to soften the blow this time, his father had been arrested as a common thief.

He could hear his mother crying in her bedroom yet didn't have a clue how to help. His problems at Hogwarts now paled into insignificance, what house he was in there hardly mattered when he and his mother could end up homeless. Draco was well aware that the ministry had hit the Malfoy's hard financially the last time his parents had been arrested. This time though, there was very little left for the ministry to take. His mother had explained the financial restraints they were now forced to work under, restraints that meant he was restricted to Hogwarts for his education.

The house they were currently living in may not be much but it was at least a roof over their head. The one thing his old aunt had hammered into Draco's head was that one day, he would become head of the family. She would talk for hours on the responsibilities this would bring, along with the respect.

More than anything else, Draco Malfoy craved the respect of others. It was a bitter blow to discover that just being a Malfoy was no longer enough to be held in high esteem anymore. Draco was left to ponder what else his old aunt had told him where real life was not the way she painted it. His only crumb of comfort was that his suspension from Hogwarts had just paid an unexpected bonus, Draco would have hated to be in school today.

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The Malfoy story was of course the main topic of discussion inside the castle, that was except for a couple of redheads who also happened to be twins. Fred and George had their heads together, working on an entirely different and much more important matter - their future careers.

"So whatever we pull has to be big, we're talking whole school here?"

Fred was nodding in agreement but had a proviso. "We need to tread carefully though, it needs to be funny without being offensive in any way." Unusually, he had then to explain that comment to his twin. "If we can make it harmless fun, McGonagall is less likely to ban us from the quidditch trips and watching the broadcasts in the hall."

George understood and unhappily agreed with his twin, the degree of difficulty had just increased by a large margin. "Ok, let me see what we've got here. A prank on the whole school that won't see those privileges revoked. Said prank to be carried out under the noses of two marauders, who just happen to be heads of house."

"Don't forget the junior marauders, catching them out is not going to be easy either. They've been raised by the marauders and are going to be alert for any of our normal stuff."

"We need something new, something never tried before, it has to be out of this world..."

Both received the bolt of inspiration at the same time.

"That could work..."

"But we would have to..."

"No problem, do we go for the big prize though?"

"Absolutely! We want this to be memorable so professors too."

"Oh it will certainly be memorable."

"Yeah, we'll either be the talk of the castle or home early for Christmas."

Neither twin wanted to think about their mother's reaction to that outcome so both concentrated on ensuring their prank would work perfectly. Their voices dropped to barely above a whisper. This was totally unnecessary since no one else could ever follow a conversation between the twins. Just listening in was usually

enough to give anyone unfortunate enough to eavesdrop a splitting headache.

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With Dudley spending the night at the Lovegoods, Emma had been surprised when Dan offered to take her out to dinner. Sitting in their favorite restaurant with a fine bottle of wine on the table, she knew her husband was buttering her up for something big. Emma wasn't wrong and didn't have long to wait before Dan brought up what was on his mind.

"The company has asked me to consider taking on a full time job as head of their new media unit. They've now proved their system works and see this as the next step in the process. We've got some time to discuss this but I think we really need to give an answer in the next few weeks. What are your thoughts?"

Emma let the waiter deliver their starters before beginning to run the potentially life changing decision through their usual pro/con process.

"I don't see any point in building our practice up as we're both fairly certain Hermione will never be a dentist. I think it's also fair to say the kid's futures will be financially secure no matter what we decide here. Both Harry and Dudley will be wealthy and it's fair to say the future Lady Potter will not be hurting for money."

Dan got the gist of what his wife was hinting at. "You're suggesting we take the kids out of the equation and make the decision based on what we want?"

"Selling the practice will see us financially secure, can we assume any job you take with PMP will have a salary that at least matches what you earn now?"

"I think the figures would be a fair bit higher than that."

"Ok, so we've taken the financial side out. I'm also assuming Dudley's continual involvement in the project is guaranteed? Anything that allows the kids to spend more time together gets my vote, especially next year when Luna is at Hogwarts too. I think that just leaves what we ourselves want to do? I've seen the way your

eyes sparkle with excitement when you're working with Remus, dentistry hasn't done that to you for quite a while."

Her husband's eyes were sparkling now as the excitement of the potential new challenge shone through. "I feel like some of the early film makers must have felt, like a pioneer. This is all new and we're all learning as we go along. Quidditch coverage is only the first step on this journey, there are other magical sports that could benefit from coverage like this. It's not even just sports though, most of the magical community have never even seen a news bulletin before. Then there are musical events, plays..."

Emma leaned across the table and silenced her husband with a kiss. "I don't think we need to wait those few weeks to let them know you're taking the job, do you?"

Dan reached across and held his wife's hand. "What about you though, the practice is something we built together."

"You know I've always wanted to paint, perhaps try my hand at writing, this could be my shot. With Hermione and Harry away and you in a job you're going to love, I won't have to feel guilty in the slightest at spending hours indulging myself in something I really enjoy. Dudley is no bother at all and growing more independent by the day."

Dan could only smile at the woman who made all his dreams come true those years ago when she said yes. He saw a small opportunity to repay some of that love and devotion she had shown him, an opportunity to help with her own dreams. "We could have the loft converted into a studio for you, some large windows to provide as much natural light as possible. We've both seen what magic can do and the room could be to any specification you want, and probably completed in under a day."

With decisions made, they could settle back and enjoy their meal. The excitement was like the early days when they opened their practice, without any of the financial worries that went hand in hand with that venture. Dan would contact Remus tomorrow and then they would call their lawyers. That was all for tomorrow though, tonight Dan's only thoughts focused on the beautiful woman sitting at the table beside him, and the fact that they had the house to themselves tonight.

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Since his father had received a dementor's kiss for leading that attack, Draco dreaded the knock at the door that would signal the ministry coming to call. He was now head of the family, a family that appeared destined for infamy with destitution thrown in just to finish the Malfoy's off. Therefore it was with a great deal of trepidation that he opened their door, only to find the last person he expected to be standing there.

"Professor Black, what are you doing here?"

"Hello Draco, I would like to speak with your mother, if I may?"

Draco stood to the side to allow their guest to enter. As Sirius passed the boy, he felt compelled to say something. "I was sorry to hear about your father. He and I had never seen eye to eye, probably since we were about your age, but I would never wish that fate on anyone."

"Thank you professor, mother is through in the other room."

He found Cissi sitting straight up in her chair, ready to face whatever came through the door. She relaxed her posture slightly after spotting just who her guest was. "Sirius, to what do I owe the pleasure? I dearly hope you haven't come to gloat at my late husband's demise?"

Sirius gave her a weak smile. "Maybe once upon a time you would have been right with that thought Cissi, but not anymore. I have a wife and daughter who would be severely disappointed in me if I were to do something so crass as that, I never want to let them down. As I told Draco, Lucius and I never saw eye to eye on anything but I still wouldn't wish that fate on him. No, my visit here today concerns you and your son."

Sirius was invited to sit and politely turned down the offer of a drink before getting down to the real reason he'd made the journey. "It's no secret Draco hasn't settled in at Hogwarts, and I can't see this latest development helping that. With this in mind I have reconsidered my decision to fund his education." Sirius could see this almost had Cissi in tears so pushed on with his offer. "I think it



would be beneficial to you both if Draco attended school elsewhere, and I'm prepared to fund it. Fees and any other expenses involved."

Cissi had to remind herself to breathe, she had thought for one awful moment there that Draco wouldn't be able to attend school at all. This offer could solve a lot of their problems but something was troubling her. "I don't mean to sound ungrateful Sirius, but why the change of heart?"

Sirius could hardly say that he didn't want the little shit anywhere near his family, next time Harry might do some permanent damage. He considered any extra expense involved in Draco changing school to be money well spent, the peace of mind alone would make it worth the extra gold involved. "Draco hasn't made any friends at Hogwarts, quite the opposite in fact. We both know children can be cruel and I fear the first argument that Draco finds himself involved in would escalate into spellfire the instant his father's fate was mentioned. As he's already on his last warning from McGonagall, I feel this is the best option for him."

Cissi's emotions had taken a real beating recently and this act of kindness saw her fighting back the tears. "Thank you Sirius, a fresh start would be the best thing for Draco. We'll look into our options at once and hope he can start elsewhere after the Christmas Holidays. I will ensure he knows how generous an offer this is and that I expect him to grasp it with both hands. You have my assurance his behaviour and academic performance will be closely monitored."

With phase one complete, Sirius now pushed on to the second reason he'd come calling today. "Cissi, I also have a job offer for you..."

"Sirius, you have done more than anyone to get us back on our feet but I won't accept more charity. Once I get Draco settled into his new school, I can then start looking for work."

"I think we need to be realistic here Cissi, with your prison record and Lucius' last escapade, you would struggle to get a job that wasn't serving food and drink in some of the seedier establishments along Knockturn Alley. The job I had lined up could certainly not be considered charity, you'll earn every Knut and do so using that keen mind I know you possess."

It was a deflated Cissi who used his own argument against him. "What you say is true Sirius, which is another reason to turn down your offer. I don't have any skills, Lucius would never stand back and allow his wife to work."

"You possess all the qualities we're looking for, this job could have been designed with you in mind."

She was now intrigued and urged Sirius to continue. "Our company is branching out to cover broadcasting sports, with other events already in the pipeline. You may have heard this?"

Cissi could only nod in exasperation, "Modesty doesn't suit you Sirius, the entire country knows that."

She recognised the twinkle in her cousin's eyes, this usually proceeded one of those stupid pranks of his. Cissi wasn't far wrong.

"What the entire country doesn't know is just who the person we intend to run the entire division is, his name is Daniel Granger and he's a muggle."

Even though Sirius had just guaranteed her son's education, Cissi couldn't keep the exasperation from showing in her reply. "That's a prank too far, even for you Sirius. Are you nuts?"

"I am in full control of my faculties and this is no ordinary muggle. Dan has been aware of our world for over a decade now, and his daughter will be the next Lady Potter. Harry is still my heir at the moment as Joy can't head the family. Dan Granger is already considered family but that's not why we appointed him, he also happens to be one of the smartest men I know."

"He may very well be smart but he can't possibly understand the complexities and idiosyncrasies of our society, even after a decade of contact. He's an outsider and will be treated as such by most of our society, you must know this?" Sirius now had that infuriating smirk going full blast.

"That's why I need you to be his assistant. You will be able to steer him away from making unnecessary foul ups and also be there in any situations that require magic used. I think you would have to agree Cissi, you possess the skills needed to meet the job

description that I just outlined. The only reservation we have is whether you could or would work for a muggle?"

The once proud pureblood princess had to take a couple more calming breaths before answering. "I agreed with your earlier assessment of my job prospects. A short skirt and low top while serving rot gut whiskey and slops to grasping wizards in Diagon seemed to be in my immediate future. If you think I wouldn't prefer working with a muggle to that then my earlier assessment of you was spot on - you're nuts."

"Good, oh and a word of advice. Give the low tops and short skirts a miss, Emma Granger is not a woman you want angry at you."

She knew this was his idea of a bad joke but Cissi couldn't be anything but incredibly grateful to her cousin at the moment. Sirius had been there for her from the instant she'd stepped off the boat from Azkaban. Andi had told her it was purely down to his intervention that she got out of that hell hole early in the first place, her sister also went to great lengths explaining how Sirius was ensuring the Black name was once more one of the most respect in magical Britain. He'd chosen a route that was the exact opposite to that pursued by the Malfoy family, it wasn't too difficult to judge which was the more successful. His best friends included a werewolf and a muggle, yet both appeared set to succeed in a society that would once have shunned, if not outright despised them.

It also didn't escape her attention that Draco extolling the traditional Malfoy line in rhetoric was the main reason her son was sitting next door, and not currently inside Hogwarts with his peers. The mother would be having quite a few heart to heart talks with her son before he left for whatever school they chose for him. These thoughts were going through her head as she showed Sirius to the door. He may have departed but his visit had left something unexpected and precious behind, it was called hope.

-oOoOo-

After recording the latest quidditch match, Dan, Dudley, Luna, and of course Emma were joined by the rest of the Hogwarts contingent in the Potters' quarters after dinner. Dan had already told them all he was changing careers so the excitement levels were higher than

usual. What was unusual was Remus calling for everyone's attention, apparently he had something important to say.

"As you all know, Mr Daniel Granger here has decided to join PMP as head of our newly created media division. We welcome you to the company Dan." This resulted in some good-natured cheering.

"Now our new mirror viewing systems should be commercially available by Easter so that's how long we have to iron any bugs out of our procedures. There has been a lot of speculation on what this system should be called, I'm pleased to say we have resolved the matter. Ladies and gentlemen, it will be known as the Dynamic And New Omnioculars Vision System."

This was James' cue, "That's a bit of a mouthful to put on an order form Moony?"

"I couldn't agree more Prancer, henceforth it shall be known and marketed as Danovision!"

This had everyone laughing until Padfoot revealed their logo. The two letter 'O's were clearly images of omnioculars lenses that actually reflected back at you while the lettering continually morphed from one colour to another. The name might be something of a family jest but the logo was very professional. The name Danovision though still had the power to have the six friends chuckling all the way back to the Slytherin dorm at the end of the evening.

Little had changed between Harry and Hermione since they officially became a couple, one difference though was they now said goodnight and good morning with a kiss. Neville led Dudley up to their dorm to give them a moment of privacy while Susan did the same with Luna.

Once again Dudley was greeted warmly by the rest of the Slytherin first years and he was glad of an opportunity to repay their continued hospitality. "Guys, thanks for having me here again. I was telling mum how welcome you had made me here and she came up with a suggestion. How would you guys like to spend a few days at Potter Manor over the Christmas Holidays?"

Harry entered just in time to catch the end of this offer. "Dud, that's a brilliant idea. You guys need to come, we will have such a great time. What about the girls though, I would hate for them to be left out?"

"Luna's asking them now..." Three mirrors all went off at once as the girls called from their dorm, minutes later it was confirmed that everyone would be writing home for permission first thing in the morning.

-oOoOo-

This was it, the big one!

Breakfast time inside a busy great hall on a Sunday morning, both twins felt that tingle of anticipation expected when waiting for a prank to unfold. They'd scaled their original idea back considerably as the complexities of the charms work involved soon got beyond what they were confident they could achieve. Instead of having the hall full of characters from the Star Wars film, they had reduced it to two. There was still a fair bit of charms work involved though and both had quickly realized they would never have coped with the original, more complex plan.

Not that this one wasn't demanding, it was easily the most complicated prank they'd attempted. Sneaking into the great hall last night allowed them to place charms on all the student benches, and staff chairs. The beauty of this prank though was that the charms were completely benign until someone sitting there ingested the twins' specifically designed potion, and what a potion. Again, easily the most complex they had ever produced and it was even gender specific. As much as the twins would have enjoyed seeing their head of house with a bun of hair either side of his head, they much preferred the thought of Professor James Potter transforming into a wookiee.

As the first few people began to transform, the sound of laughter ringing out around the hall was music to their ears. George was in the process of toasting his twin with their tainted pumpkin juice, about to partake in their own prank when the first scream of agony halted his hand in mid journey. All eyes now swept around the hall to identify who was in that amount of pain, only for another scream to ring out.

Lily was well versed in spotting pranks unfolding, she immediately put down her as yet untouched tea and turned to ensure Emma did the same. The first scream though saw Emma's coffee go all over the table, dropping her cup as she dived to be at her husband's side while Dan convulsed in agony. Lily herself had barely reached Dan when the second scream created chills down her spine and sent a dagger through her heart, the screaming was coming from Dudley.

Fred and George could only stand and watch as the intended fun had quickly descended into a horror show. Both twins hoped their senses were playing tricks on them and this really wasn't happening, especially as two enraged Princess Leia's were now racing in their direction from the Slytherin table. The potion had copied the distinctive hairstyle while the charm had changed their clothes to that recognisable white smock. Where the lightsabers both Leia's were wielding came from was a complete mystery to them. They soon got a close look at said weapons when the blond and the brunette began whacking them both about the body, it stung like a bitch!

"How long before the effects wear off?"

Fred only needed one glance at the little blond to know that, had that been a genuine lightsaber, his life would have been over. She was clearly in no mood to be pissed about, he quickly and honestly answered her question. "It's only timed to last for breakfast, you should be back to normal in under an hour."

"Me! You think I give a shit about looking like this? Didn't you hear that screaming? Harry had to stun Dudley because he was in agony."

A Hermione/Leia who was equally as angry took over from Luna to question George. "Did it ever occur to you that we have three non magicals at breakfast this morning? What about little Joy Black, how does your potion affect toddlers?"

Luna was struggling to keep the tears at bay as she continued from where Hermione had left off. "Your potion forces our bodies to change but it's our magic that allows the change to take place. Neither Dudley nor Uncle Dan have magic. You two poisoned them with a potion that's still trying to change their bodies, I can't imagine how painful that must be."

All thoughts of breakfast were long forgotten about amongst the students amid the unfolding drama now taking place around the hall. The occupants were torn between watching the staff trying to help the two people suffering severe reactions to the prank and the confrontation taking place at the Gryffindor table. That all changed when the red furred wookiee wearing a Gryffindor's prefect's badge decided he just had to have his say on the matter. This was now prime time soap opera.

"I agree the twins should never have pulled this stupid prank but they can hardly be blamed for these unintended and unforeseen consequences. After all, this school is for witches and wizards."

Hermione went very quiet and completely still at this, a sure sign to anyone who knew her of an impending explosion. They didn't have long to wait. "I'm really sickened that you feel that way Mr Weasley, that attitude disgusts me. My father and Dudley may not be magical but they spent yesterday recording a quidditch match so you could all sit here and watch it for free today. There only payment for doing so is to visit the castle and spend some time with their families."

Hermione spun round and pointed at the big screen, a bolt of energy left her hand and an almighty crash signaled the Hogwarts window on the wider world was no more. People around the screen's vicinity were ducking with their hands protecting their heads, expecting shards of broken mirror to be raining down on them, it never happened. The amount of energy Hermione had hit the big screen with ensured there wasn't a piece of mirror bigger than a grain of sand left.

"If they are not welcome in Hogwarts then neither is that, you don't deserve it..."

Hermione was cut off mid-rant by a shout from the other side of the hall. "Hermione, Luna, we're heading to the infirmary."

Harry's call had an instantaneous effect on both girls, they wheeled away from the Weasleys and raced to follow the group heading out the hall toward the infirmary.

A wrinkled version of Princess Leia was not something the twins wanted to see either, but that's who detached herself from this group and made her way over to the Gryffindors.

"Although Professor Potter is your head of house, since you just put his son and one of the professor's best friends in the infirmary, I will be dealing with your punishment in this matter."

Prefect Percy could see the distinct possibility of an injustice being done here, and he so wanted the girl who'd just made a fool of him pay, so spoke out. "I agree the twins should be punished for what they did here this morning but what about the punishment for those girls Headmistress, who will be handling that?"

That steely gaze sandwiched between two doughnuts of grey hair was even more off-putting than usual though it was McGonagall's tone of voice that indicated how angry she was here. "And just what did they do that broke the school rules Mr Weasley?"

"What? Surely those weapons of theirs must be against school rules? Why did they even have them in the great hall anyway?"

"Those weapons as you call them are aids to teach fencing, Professor Sirius Black tutors them every Sunday directly after breakfast. They use them because they are not as dangerous as real blades, delivering only a mild stinging hex when in contact with a body."

Both twins winced at the word 'mild' but neither was stupid enough to provoke McGonagall when she was in a mood like this. Percy though was not to be denied, the rules had been broken and he wanted those guilty to be dealt with. "What about casting spells out of class and destruction of school property?"

"Did anyone hear Miss Granger cast a spell, or see her use a wand? That appeared to me to be a case of accidental magic, brought on by her reaction to the potions attack on her father and the boy she considers a brother."

Percy couldn't bear the thought of those two girls getting off Scott free. "Surely destroying the screen deserves some form of punishment?"



"It might, but not from me or Hogwarts. That screen was not school property, it was here on loan from PMP. The very company that has just announced who is in charge of their new media division. That important post is held by Daniel Granger, Hermione's father and the muggle your twin brothers just poisoned."

Fred and George wished their elder brother would be quiet but they were now discovering another downside to their latest prank. The potion not only changed their victim's cosmetic appearance, but physical stature too. How do you tell a six foot ten wookie to shut up?

Whatever punishment McGonagall dreamed up, it couldn't be as bad as the poisonous stares shooting in their direction from the rest of the school at the loss of the big screen. It was easy to see they were going to be blamed for it. The way Percy was carrying on though, he appeared certain to be joining them at the head of the school's shit list. This was an amazing turnaround, leaving Ron as the most popular Weasley inside Hogwarts. Not that this was saying much though.

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Harry stood beside his father inside the infirmary, he was deep in thought as he surveyed the scene in front of them. Dudley was unconscious with his mum and Luna sitting either side of his bed. In the bed right next to Dudley the same tableau was repeated with different players. Uncle Dan was the one unconscious with Hermione and Aunt Emma at his bedside.

The pranks effects had worn off the magical people effected which was a great relief. Susan had been struggling to contain an enraged wookie Neville from marching over to the Gryffindor table and ripping some Weasley limbs off. At one point Harry thought he was going to have to stun his best friend too. Neville watching Luna and Hermione set about the twins with their lightsabers was probably the only thing that stopped a stunning spell being necessary.

Harry's thoughts had reached a conclusion so it was time to air his views. "Dad, I think coming to Hogwarts was a mistake. Can we go back to school with Dudley?"

This jolted James out of his own thoughts. "What brought that on son, I thought you liked it here?"

"Since September we've had Dumbledore breaking into the castle looking for us, Dudley challenged to a duel, Hermione hospitalized after being hit with a dark curse and now Uncle Dan and Dudley are lying there unconscious. There are parts of Hogwarts I really like but standing here helpless while our family are in the infirmary is not one of them."

James knew he had to choose his words carefully here. If Harry decided he wanted to leave Hogwarts, it was a given that Hermione would go too. Luna would then certainly not want to come here next September and there was a very high probability that both Susan and Neville would follow their friends' lead, following them right out of Hogwarts. Looking again at what was in front of them, it wasn't hard to see how his son had reached that conclusion.

"If this was a deliberate attack on our family son, we would already be packing. For all the Weasley twins' faults, they are not bad guys. They shot for the stars without properly thinking through the consequences. Had it been you and me who drank that potion, instead of Dudley and Dan, we would all have had a great laugh about it. Had Joy drank tainted juice and Sirius been a wookie, I don't think any of us would have been able to stop his rampage."

"I know it wasn't deliberate dad but the results are just the same, first Hermione and now Dudley. It's as if we're being told we're not wanted here."

"It may seem like that at the moment son but stop and think of all the friends you've made since coming here, friends we hope can spend part of the holidays at the manor with us. Dumbledore would be an issue no matter where you went to school so your mother and I both think you and Neville are safer here. The Malfoy issue has been taken care of and you better believe the marauders will be having a talk with the Weasley twins. That is of course assuming Minerva leaves anything for us to talk to."

James then placed his arm around Harry's shoulders, pulling him close. "It isn't any easier for me standing here so I perfectly understand how you feel. How about this for a plan? If you still feel the same at summer then we'll have a family meeting to decide what

to do next. Dudley will be moving on to his new school then and, should you wish to join him, I would be ok with that. I think a year at Hogwarts will put us all in a better position to make that decision. Will you give it that long?"

"Okay dad, that's fair. If one of our family gets attacked again though..."

"We'll kick their arses through the nearest window on our way out the door."

Harry nodded at that before noticing Hermione matching his head motion.

She'd been listening to the conversation and agreed with Harry to give Hogwarts one more chance. Hermione also agreed wholeheartedly with Harry's earlier point, just because something wasn't intentional didn't lessen the pain suffered. Malfoy might not have meant to hit her with that curse but it still hurt worse than anything else in her life. Her dad and Dudley were going to be unconscious until at least lunchtime and would find any movement painful for the next few days.

Part of her so wanted to get the hell out of this castle and back to safe, dependable Crawley. They had made friends here though and that was the only reason she had for staying. Hermione consoled herself by silently promising that the next person to hurt a member of her family was going to be very, very sorry.

A/N Thanks for reading

## Chapter 18

Dan slowly emerged from the stunner imposed darkness to discover that he was in some kind of hospital, and both his girls were sitting fretting by his bedside. He attempted a reassuring smile but could only manage a grimace, absolutely everything hurt like the devil. "What happened?"

Emma was so relieved she couldn't help but smile, seeing her husband once more back with them. She held his hand before answering his question. "The Weasley twins tried to pull a prank on the whole school, they didn't take into account there were people without magic present."

The concern in Dan's voice was instant and unmistakable. "Was Dudley affected?"

"He's in the bed next to you but hasn't stirred yet."

This almost had Dan crying, one of the boy's he considered a son was going to wake up to this amount of pain. A single glance at his daughter though had his thoughts going in a different direction, Dan hadn't been head hunted by PMP because he was stupid. He addressed his next remark directly to Hermione. "Can I assume the twins have had the error of their ways pointed out to them?"

She hung her head and only nodded in answer.

"What happened sweetie?"

"Luna and me had our lightsabers with us, we set about the twins with them."

Dan was really trying not to laugh at that image, he rightly reckoned any laughter at the moment would be very painful for him. Dan knew that Hermione and Harry's control could slip when they were very angry but this didn't sound too bad, nor like the entire story either if he was reading Hermione's demeanour right. "What else happened?"

Hermione fought back the tears at the next bit but a few still leaked out. "Their brother Percy jumped in to defend their actions. He

basically said non magicals had no business being inside Hogwarts in the first place, I'm sorry but I kinda lost it then dad."

Wondering just how bad this could be, Dan waited for Hermione to tell the rest.

"I acted like a spoilt little bitch, taking her ball back when she didn't want to play anymore. I told the entire hall that if you and Dudley weren't welcome here, then neither was all the work you do for them. I blasted the big screen into tiny pieces!"

At that Hermione could no longer hold back the tears and her father opened his arms to her. It was painful when she hugged him but comforting Hermione was his top priority here.

"Hermione love, your dad will be sore..."

"Oh, I wasn't thinking, Sorry dad I ..."

She was cut off from saying anymore by Harry's arms wrapping around her as she drew comfort from him now. "All those people were coming to watch the match this afternoon too. I've embarrassed myself, the school and my family."

Dan could only smile at the young couple before looking to James for some answers, he wasn't disappointed.

"Our girl did us proud Dan, before getting caught up in the moment. Remus left to fetch a new Danovision screen, he and Sirius should have had it fitted long before the quidditch people turned up. Miss Granger's pocket money is going to take a hit for a while though."

Everyone saw the wink James gave at the last remark, everyone but Hermione that is. She was too busy flying into his arms.

"Oh Uncle James, you're the best! I was so worried how I was going to face our friends again, and of course I'm willing to pay for the screen I destroyed."

James kissed this wonderful girl on the forehead, the girl who would one day officially become his daughter, and reckoned he couldn't love her anymore than he did at the moment. "You just did kiddo, wait until I tell Padfoot and Moony that you said I'm the best. Coming

from Hermione Granger, that's better than gold." He passed her back into the arms of his son before going over to check on the awakening Dudley.

Dudley woke to his mum on one side of his bed, and Luna on the other. That made everything alright in Dudley's world.

-oOoOo-

James was leaving the infirmary when he discovered a pair of redheaded twins hanging around the corridor.

"Hello professor, how are they?"

"We just wanted to see they were alright, perhaps get a chance to apologise?"

James knew he was going to have to face this so just decided to get it over with now. "I want you two in my office, follow me."

It was a thoroughly cowed Fred and George that followed on behind their head of house, both wondering if this day could get any worse.

James had no trouble maintaining his stern expression as he invited/ordered the twins to take a seat, he was a marauder after all. Sitting behind his desk and facing the two teens brought back fond memories, only he was on the other side of the desk now.

"Today's fiasco leaves me with no option other than to contact your parents." He decided to turn the screw a little more. "For what I have planned for you, I'll need their signed permission."

The twins were almost too afraid to ask the obvious question but, with Professor Potter sitting there and not saying another word, George bravely took the plunge. "What are you planning professor?"

"I'm planning on taking your Christmas Holidays and making you work your fingers to the bone every single day of them."

This drew audible gulps from both of them so James relented and threw the twins a bone. "The underage employment laws state I need your parents signed permission to do this, you think they'll sign?"

Confusion reigned until the marauder put them out of their misery. "You pair seem hell-bent on becoming pranksters, I intend to ensure you learn how to do this properly. I can assure you gentlemen that there is nothing that's more serious than attempting to be funny, and PMP are very serious about their joke products. You pair are going to work for us over the Christmas Holidays and hopefully we will be able to install some of that seriousness into you both."

Neither twin could quite believe what they were hearing, and then their head of house threw in the kicker. "You will of course be paid for your time and work."

Faced now with two very excited but still confused twins, James held his hand up to stop the questions as he tried to explain. "The prank you pulled today had one glaringly obvious flaw, a flaw that could have seen the aurors paying you both a visit. I'm not talking about Dudley and Dan being inside Hogwarts, that was an understandable mistake."

James had to make sure they understood the following piece of information, next time there could be a disaster. "I'm assuming you worked out the dose on yourselves, then calculating a plus or minus margin of error to account for different ages and sizes?"

Both could only nod at how quickly the master prankster had worked everything out, it had taken them days to come up with that.

"Taking those calculations into account, what would be the result of someone less than a tenth of your body mass and with an as yet undeveloped magical core drinking your potion?" James gave that a minute to sink in before answering his own question.

"I'm betting you don't know, because I don't know either. No one knows what the effects would be, as only a lunatic would actually test it on a toddler."

Fred and George were experiencing the full gamut of emotions today. From an unbelievable high of hearing one of their dreams would come true, straight to feeling sick at the possible nightmare that could easily have become reality this morning.

James decided to lay it all on the table for the boys, before the rather green tinged twins threw-up onto it. "PMP are going to be expanding into areas even we never thought were possible, for this we are going to need bright young minds. There will be a Hogwarts apprenticeship programme starting next year, but there will be pretty strict conditions. To even be considered for the programme, we're looking for a minimum of five OWL's at outstanding."

The Gryffindor head of house knew that was well within the twins' capabilities, if they applied themselves. James was merely giving them an incentive. "Once a candidate is accepted into the programme, PMP will meet the costs of their education to NEWT's and further if they wish. For that, when their formal education is completed, they're obligated by contract to work for the company for three years. After those three years, we certainly hope they would continue their employment but are free to strike out on their own if they wish."

George asked the all-important question for both of them. "You would consider us as PMP apprentices?"

"If you meet the criteria, then yes. You both have a flair for this that reminds me of the marauders at your age, what you need to consider is that times are now different. Even in third year, we were very conscious of fighting against the evil creeping into Hogwarts. The marauders had what we considered to be legitimate targets, refining our skills against people who went on to become death eaters. It's wonderful to be sitting here and able to say those days are gone."

James then focused on the two pranksters. "While we can't have a repeat of today, I don't want to choke off the creativity your prank displayed. What I'm hoping for is to provide you with a more commercial outlet for your talents. If you have ideas, we can help develop those ideas into products. If those products reach the stage where they have a PMP logo on them, you would both be in line for a share of any profits they make. Over the holidays, we hope to be able to demonstrate to you both the detailed and rigorous processes required for an idea to become a product on a shelf."

Both boys were now on their feet, shaking their professor's hand in gratitude. The twins knew their parents would go for this scheme in a big way, apprenticeships were exceedingly rare and highly prized



in their society. That both of them would have to work their socks off to gain the entry qualifications would be a massive plus in favour of their parents accepting this, the last two years of their education paid for would certainly clinch the deal.

Fred and George knew there were people at Hogwarts who would give their right arm for an opportunity like this, they certainly would. To even be considered was an honour they were now determined to prove themselves worthy of. Hogwarts was about to see a whole new side to the Weasley twins. Percy could work at the ministry if he wanted, Fred and George now had a career path all mapped out. It was two very happy redheads who left their head of house's office, only Professor Potter's request to keep it quiet until he had a chance to talk with their parents stopping them from shouting with glee.

James watched them go with a smile on his lips, helping to shape young minds and lives was what teaching was all about to the marauder. He briefly considered intervening in Percy's punishment but decided to let it stand. The lad had always been a bit officious and pedantic but the prefect's badge his academic scores saw him awarded appeared to have brought those traits to the fore. A few detentions might just take the shine of his ego, before his head of house had to consider taking the shiny badge off Percy's robes.

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Everyone in the great hall now understood the phrase 'pre-production model'. The new 'Danovision' screen was sleeker, slimmer and, if a product could possibly be classed as this, sexy as hell. When Professor Black was heard to say that there were now two models of their screens, this and a smaller one for home use, not a single person thought they would have any trouble selling them.

Both professional quidditch teams immediately placed pre-orders for the big screens while a few of the players wanted dibs on ones suitable for their homes, all without even asking the price and before seeing the screen in action. After watching today's broadcast, Sirius was certain the pre-orders would increase dramatically. He didn't even have to let slip that the minister of magic had already put his name down for the first system off the production line.

With their communication mirrors systems due for its imminent launch, the company really couldn't get 'Danovision' to market any sooner than Easter. This would also give them longer to build up a bank of recorded programmes for new owners to watch. They were still quite a bit away from broadcasting to all the screens at once, though Dan was already working with Remus on that. The company really didn't want to get into the business of building a broadcasting company, rather hoping other innovators would fill that gap. They had no interest in becoming magical society's equivalent of the BBC, their collective vision for PMP saw their company evolving more along the lines of something like Sony. The broadcasting company would produce the programs using PMP equipment to film, broadcast and watch the final product.

The broadcast had started but Sirius was immediately drawn from quidditch when his mirror alarm went off. This was not the Dumbledore warning though, rather one they had practically forgotten about. While Pettigrew had still been unaccounted for, the rat had his own dedicated alarm. The marauders also thought it might be a good idea to assign an animagus alert, and that was what had just triggered on his mirror. With two of them being able to transform into animals, it was quite easy to programme the map to tell the difference between whether someone was in their animagus form or not. Then it was only a matter of setting the screens so that Padfoot, Prancer or Minerva's pussy didn't trigger the alert.

Sirius had his mirror out and could see Remus was doing the same, both relaxed after seeing who had entered the wards in their animagus form. Technically, that should be their unregistered animagus form. The mirror also showed James had sprinted to the main staircase, and was now waiting there to see how this played out.

He was between their unannounced visitor and the kids currently in the infirmary, able to head the intruder off if that was their intended destination. If they headed into the great hall, James would be able to arrive behind them and block the uninvited guest's exit. With the kids' mirrors not being keyed to this alarm, the marauders didn't have to worry about them becoming involved.

The reporter in Rita was drawn to the noise coming from the great hall like a moth to a flame, being inherently nosy was a definite plus in her chosen career. She was shocked out of her mind at the sight

of hundreds of people all sitting around a screen, shouting encouragement at the quidditch match currently being shown there. Rita was initially actually quite hurt. What was the point of sneaking in here if no one was paying the slightest bit of notice? Her form could have been an elephant and they wouldn't have cared a jot, unless she walked between them and the screen.

If Rita wanted to discover a lead on Dumbledore, she figured this would be the place to start. If she was honest with herself, sneaking into Hogwarts and praying for a break was all she had left. It was a pity she couldn't report on the phenomenon she was watching in front of her. Her editor would love the story but it would blow her cover, not something she wanted to do. Even as a bug, Rita found herself being drawn into what everyone else was watching. She landed on a beam about fifteen feet up and settled down to watch as well, there were certainly worse ways to spend a Sunday afternoon.

Rita felt as if her last comment must have tempted the gods because suddenly she was in a lot of pain. Hitting the floor in her human form only saw that pain increase, it felt like she'd broken her collar bone. That the reporter now had three wands in her face didn't bode well for how the rest of her day was going to turn out.

The marauders had Rita's location pinned down and all three cast the animagus reversal spell at the same time. Rita clattering to the floor brought Minerva and Barty running to discover just what was going on, the headmistress couldn't quite hide her glee at the trespasser they'd caught. Putting any of her students in danger was always going to earn you a place near the very top of Minerva McGonagall's shit list, Rita was right up there and now deep in it.

By the time Rita was taken to the Hogwarts infirmary, there were two aurors accompanying Amelia and waiting on the unregistered animagus' arrival. That those two aurors both had the last name Longbottom ensured there wasn't much sympathy for the reporter, Alice did at least wait until Poppy had fixed the broken collar bone before slapping cuffs on Rita.

Barty had every confidence in his head auror so was content to stand in the background and let Amelia run the show. That most of the people Amelia considered family were already inside the infirmary would only focus her determination to get to the bottom of this.

"Rita, we're going to have a little chat here that will determine just what we charge you with. Being an unregistered animagus brings its own charges and penalties. That you were using your form to trespass on a school full of vulnerable children could see those charges and penalties go through the roof. Now, what were you doing inside Hogwarts?"

The reporter had plenty of experience on just how ruthless the ministry could be with criminals, she'd covered quite a few of the death eater trials for the Prophet. Rita had no wish to read headlines about herself being shipped off to Azkaban, she thought only the truth could stop that. "I was looking for any clues that would hopefully lead me to Dumbledore. My editor has me searching for him but, after days spent going through every article and report I could get my hands on, I had nothing. Desperation brought me to Hogwarts."

Amelia knew she had this bitch bang to rights, she wanted to get her hands on the big prize though. "Just what were the Prophet's intentions with this move?"

"I think our editor is desperate to make up for the mistake he made after printing that Dumbledore story. The Malfoy case was one where everyone benefited, I'm sure he hoped to do the same with Dumbledore. The ministry gets to arrest him and the Prophet gets the story."

The interrogation had almost reached the level of a friendly chat, this was deliberate as Amelia slipped in the all important question. "How did your editor expect you to be able to find Dumbledore? Does he know about your animagus ability?"

"Oh yes. Years ago he wouldn't print a story of mine unless I revealed how I got it, Mr White didn't want the paper sued. When he discovered what I could do, I was the paper's top reporter within eighteen months."

All present knew that the Prophet's editor was now seriously implicated in his reporter's illegal activities. That they were, in this case, using those abilities to track down magical Britain's most wanted wizard only bought them a little leeway. The editor's main

objectives here were clearly to sell more papers, and hopefully worm the Prophet's way back into PMP's good graces.

Barty was mentally weighing up the pros and cons of these revelations in his head. The Prophet had been very helpful in those early days just after the dark lord's demise, there could be no denying that. While the rest of their society had moved on from there though, the paper was still stuck in the pre-Voldemort days and hadn't developed the way it should have. This was being borne out by the steady circulation rise of the far more innovative Quibbler.

The minister wanted to leave the country in good hands when he eventually stepped down but thought Peter White was too old school to help drag their community where it needed to go. Barty had no burning desire to see the editor heading off to jail though, providing Peter's early retirement came along in the near future. He also thought Rita was far too useful a resource to be rotting her arse off in Azkaban. He would speak to Amelia about the possibility of recruiting the soon to be ex-reporter, Rita could be a useful addition to the auror department's undercover squad.

Barty had been serious when he told Minerva that the ministry held no attraction for him anymore, he would retire tomorrow if they caught Dumbledore tonight. That Headmistress McGonagall had hinted heavily she might have a job for him when he left the ministry was another incentive to retire soon. Teaching history to young minds would be imminently preferable to some of the crap he had to deal with at the moment. Barty would happily spend the rest of his life ensuring that no youngsters were ever seduced by delusional dark nutters, not while he was working in the castle.

In direct contrast, the minister had been briefed on PMP's proposed apprenticeship programme and thought this could be the best opportunity for Hogwarts students in many generations. He couldn't help but wish some of these things had been available when his own son attended Hogwarts, perhaps Barty junior would have turned out differently.

That Amelia would be his recommended candidate to be the next minister of magic should help her secure the post, that she would undoubtedly have the backing of her 'family' should all but seal the deal. She had no serious competition for the top job from within the ministry, and the Potter - Black - Longbottom support should end

any threat from those outside that establishment. When you factored in Lovegood, and even Granger with the advent of Danovision could become a player, that should be enough powerful backing to win any election campaign.

The wizard Barty really admired though was James Potter, and he personally thought Lord Potter would make an outstanding minister of magic some day. James was such a contradiction in terms yet also one of the most grounded individuals it had been Barty's pleasure to meet. From an old pureblood family yet married a first generation witch and has a werewolf as a best friend. He's currently head of Gryffindor yet his son gets sorted into Slytherin, along with Harry's betrothed who was also a first generation witch. It was in his treatment and raising of the other son though that most drew Barty's admiration. The lad was a muggle yet was clearly at home in the magical world, he also couldn't help but notice that Dudley's group of magical friends appeared more than comfortable in the muggle world too.

The concept that there actually was only one world was so alien to British witches and wizards that most muggles might well have been from another planet. For generations the ministry and the wizengamot had forced through policies and laws to reinforce these barriers that existed. Barty truly believed that by the time Harry and Miss Granger's children made it to Hogwarts, those barriers might be gone forever. To the group of friends, those self-same barriers clearly didn't exist. Yes they respected the secrecy laws and refrained from performing magic in front of those they shouldn't, it didn't stop them from enjoying whatever the muggle/magical worlds had to offer. It was also blatantly obvious their beliefs and views were rapidly spreading amongst their peers at Hogwarts.

The minister of magic still had trouble believing he'd lived to see a muggle child being made welcome inside Slytherin House. This miracle in itself offered Barty serious hope for the future of their society.

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It was dinner time before the group of first year Slytherins returned to the great hall. Madam Pomfrey had allowed Dan and Dudley to leave but wanted them both to remain in the castle for another twenty four hours, no one was going to complain about that. Where

Dudley went, Luna was sure to follow and their youngest member would attend classes with them tomorrow, along with Dudley.

Hermione was holding on to Harry's arm, unsure of the reception she would receive from the rest of the school. The other first year Slytherins weren't slow to show their support, relaxing Hermione's fears until the twins showed up.

"Dudley, we're really sorry about what happened this morning."

"Same with your father Hermione."

"You were right, we just didn't think."

"I was wrong for attacking you both, and for that I'm sorry too."

Susan could see this turning mushy and wasn't about to let that spoil a perfectly good dinner. "Yeah Hermione, it should have been that perfect, sorry prefect brother of theirs you and Luna should have set about."

This drew a few laughs, prefect Percy wasn't well liked even in his own house.

Pansy though had another complaint. "Hey, how about apologising to us. Because Dudley's stuck inside the castle under Pomfrey's orders, we're missing movie night."

Harry had a surprise for them. "Actually, you won't miss anything. My dad is going to Crawley and will put on a movie before he has to take care of some business."

Hermione never could resist not knowing something. "Why's Uncle James going to our house tonight?"

Harry appeared embarrassed to answer because of the present company. He finally relented as it would be all over the castle by tomorrow anyway. "He's stopping there before going to visit the Weasley's. He apparently wants to talk to these two's mum and dad."

The twins releasing whoops of joy and high-fiving each other was not the response any of them expected. They returned to the

Gryffindor table in great spirits to finish their dinner, before practically skipping to their detention.

The movie James chose was also unexpected, but went down a storm. Disney's 'The Sword and the Stone' had everyone laughing and cheering at the on screen antics and cartoon portrayal of magic.

The headmistress though showing Merlin teaching the young boy was a stroke of genius, as was the so-called transfigurations shown in the movie. Merlin changing himself into a bug to make the dragon ill was very funny, impossible but it got the children thinking on the possibilities. That's why Minerva thought these screens were such a great educational tool, anything that could inspire the children think for themselves was worth its weight in gold as far as she was concerned.

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James was leaving the Burrow while trying to hold his laughter in, at least until he got away from the Weasley parents. This was the first time he'd met Arthur and Molly since the days of Dumbledore's old Order of the Phoenix, apart from listening, along with the rest of the school, to those loud and rather frequent howlers the twins' received from their mother. After Dumbledore's manipulations had become public knowledge, distancing yourself from the self appointed leader of the light was a priority. Not that the Potters were ever really close friends with the Weasleys, more like acquaintances with mutual enemies.

James still knew them well enough to understand that rendering Molly Weasley speechless was a marauder worthy achievement, and the main cause of his current hilarity.

Both parents had been understandably worried when the head of Gryffindor turned up at their door, that the visit would be concerning Fred and George was already a given. James didn't bother mentioning the trouble the twins had caused this morning, Minerva had dealt with the situation so he didn't see the need to drag it up again.

For Arthur and Molly, to discover that their problem pair weren't in trouble was a great relief. The Christmas holiday job offer came as a sharp surprise, that it could possibly lead to a full apprenticeship



further down the line was a complete and utter shock. The Weasley parents were all in favour of the conditions laid down for acceptance to the programme. Both knew their twin sons had loads of potential, it was just motivating them to unlock their potential that had always been the problem.

When their daughter set off for Hogwarts next September, there would be five Weasleys inside the castle. With money already tight, sustaining that would cause severe financial hardship. The possibility of George and Fred winning apprenticeships wasn't just some light at the end of the tunnel, it was more like the dawn of a new day. They could go from having to pay fees for five children down to just two after the twins sat their OWL's, an unbelievable and life-changing saving for the Weasley family.

Arthur had trouble with his own laughter when Molly eventually recovered from the shocking good news. It was funny as she then attempted to hug their potential benefactor, while Professor James Potter shot out the door as quickly as courtesy and manners allowed.

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Albus was mentally revising his plans for tomorrow, yes it was the umpteenth time he'd gone over them today but it wasn't like he had anything else to occupy his attention. The former headmaster was certain Voldemort would strike soon, he needed the monitoring charms on those boys so he could rush to the rescue. Only then could he defeat the dark lord and reclaim his rightful place in British wizarding society.

The ministry, Hogwarts and that blasted newspaper must all reckon they were being so clever, working together with their ruse to get Albus Dumbledore down into the Hogwarts dungeons. Albus though had very different plans of his own. His elf had managed to 'find' him a first year Gryffindor timetable so Albus now knew exactly where both boys would be at any given time. They must really think he was going senile with that 'both in Slytherin' rubbish, it would be a cold day in hell before a Potter or a Longbottom were sorted anywhere but the house of lions.

A/N Thanks for reading

Only one more chapter to go - I think! (haven't written one word of it yet)

## Chapter 19

The Slytherin first year girl's dorm was buzzing with energy and excitement next morning. Luna was hyper at the prospect of sitting-in on a day's classes at Hogwarts, her enthusiasm was so infectious that it carried the other girls along too. As they all headed down to meet the guys before heading for breakfast, Susan noted Pansy appeared troubled about something and quietly asked her what was wrong. Hermione and Susan both hoped Luna would be joining them in second year come September so she was keen to sort any problems Pansy had with this now.

"Oh Susan, I think Luna's great and can't wait until she's here full time. I was more concerned about Dudley. He doesn't have magic yet he's going to be taking classes with us today, I don't think that's fair on poor Dudley."

Susan's smile was wide and genuine. She was really pleased that Pansy had thought of Dudley, though she might see another side to Luna if she made a play for him. "Trust me Pansy, his mum and dad wouldn't have allowed this if they didn't know Dudley could cope with it."

"But Susan, we've got defence first. He could get hurt!"

"Not gonna happen Pansy, we've been getting defence lessons for years from the same person who will be teaching us this morning. You saw what he did to Malfoy with swords, even if Draco had used his wand Dudley would still have beat him in a duel. Professor Black knows exactly what Dudley is capable of and won't let any harm come to him. After that we have herbology, something Dudley is nearly as good at as Neville. He'll be fine, or Luna and Hermione will be extracting retribution again."

This had Pansy shaking her head in bafflement. "It's not that I don't believe you Susan, it's just a lot to take in that a muggle can defend themselves from magic. It goes against everything I've been taught before coming to Hogwarts. Then again, loads of things in Hogwarts have been so different than I expected. I never thought I would have as much fun, or as many friends." Pansy was now blushing as she revealed the next bit. "Dudley is different from anyone I've ever met, not that I've met any other muggles. The three of those boys are just so... I don't know how to put it into words."

The blush told Susan some of the words she was thinking of, it was with a chuckle that she answered Pansy. "Oh, hot, hunks or gorgeous usually works for me." She put her arm around her dorm mate. "A word of advice, Neville is really the only one who's unattached so you better get in quick if your interested."

Pansy's blush had now reached epic proportions but this was information she needed to know. "I thought you and Neville were close?"

"We're very close but I love all three of those boys as my brothers, I just don't see that ever changing. We're like a family, with Hermione as my big sis while Luna is the baby of the group. We all grew up together, went to school together and even live together for some parts of the year. I'll tell you something though, any potential boyfriend of mine is going to have a lot to live up to, not to mention three brothers watching to see they behave themselves. Not that I can't take care of myself mind you, my aunt made sure all us girls knew how to fight dirty if we needed to."

The two girls walked arm in arm to catch up with the rest of the group. Pansy wasn't even sure what she was feeling this morning, that was until Susan put it into words. In any first year potential boyfriend survey, those three boys would be close to the top amongst all her peers. That Neville was the only one unattached narrowed the field somewhat but he was hardly a consolation prize. That he was the only one of the trio of boys who was a pureblood never entered Pansy's thoughts, the circumstances of someone's birth had become of no relevance to the first year Slytherins. Their eyes had been well and truly opened by their new friends. Not by preaching any particular doctrine at them either, just the six of them being themselves was more than enough to make a difference to the rest of Slytherin.

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Ron Weasley sat in defence, seething with anger. The reluctant Hufflepuff had been keeping his head down and staying out of trouble, something that seemed a lot easier to do now that Malfoy had left. The reason for that anger was sitting at the front, amongst his friends. Here was this muggle who had cost his older brothers detentions now sitting in a Hogwarts class, it just wasn't right. As the

professor was laying out today's lesson plan, Ron just had to stick his hand up.

Sirius saw the Weasley boy had raised his head above the parapet for the first time so gave him the opportunity to ask his question, he was rather taken aback after he did.

"Sir, some people in the class don't have magic, how are they going to take part? Three of my brothers received detentions after muggles suffered side effects from a prank, I wouldn't like to get into trouble just for doing what I'm supposed to in class."

Sirius refrained from mentioning that Ron managed to garner quite enough detentions without any outside help, he decided just to set the record straight. "Mr Weasley, your brothers received their punishments because their prank was potentially lethal to a member of the Hogwarts community, namely my daughter. As to Mr Dursley's abilities, they're more than adequate to cope with what we had planned for this morning's lesson. As I was saying, I had hoped today would see us put our dodging skills and spell accuracy to the test in some live practice..."

This time Ron didn't put his hand up, rather just interrupted Professor Black in the middle of his lesson. "That's exactly what I mean, I don't want to get detentions if a spell of mine hits a muggle in class."

By way of an answer, Sirius' wand flashed into his hand and a stinging hex flew at Dudley. He of course had already moved. "Does that answer your question Mr Weasley? I don't think you need to worry about hitting Mr Dursley with a curse..."

"He knew you were going to do that, that's why he moved."

"No Mr Weasley, unlike you he just pays attention to his surroundings. He also doesn't interrupt his professor during class as he knows this is something that annoys me intensely. Doing so just means that person has volunteered to assist me in my latest demonstration. Weasley and Dursley, front and centre."

Dudley had been sitting with Luna amongst the Slytherins while Ron had been at the back on his own, by the time the Hufflepuff slinked his way down Sirius had formulated a plan.

"Now Mr Weasley, you are going to practice your accuracy against Mr Dursley. The rules are stinging hexes only, and please pay particular attention to your environment. Go to either end of the class and then you can begin." Sirius perched on the edge of the desk Dudley had just vacated, wand in hand in case he needed to shield any of the other students.

Ron waited until he was ordered to begin, thus absolving him from any blame. In his mind, there could only be one outcome here. Even when the boy easily dodged his first two stinging hexes, Ron was still supremely confident. He started edging closer to cut down on the time his victim had to react, nearly shitting himself when one of those lightsabre things appeared in his hand and batted the hex away. They slowly circled one another with his hexes now being dodged or deflected, Ron daredn't move any closer though since the muggle was now armed and looked exceedingly dangerous.

A shout of 'down Dud' had Ron confused until the boy in front of him dropped to the floor, just as a powerful stinging hex hit directly on his right hand. Ron's wand hitting the floor was cause for loud celebration before Professor Black clamped down on it, drawing the two boys to either side of him.

"Very well done Mr Weasley, and ten points to Hufflepuff."

"But sir, I lost because he cheated..."

"Remember the rules Mr Weasley, you used them really well. Closing in to take away his ability to dodge, and then falling back out of range of his weapon. Where you got caught out was in your belief that Mr Dursley was on his own. Let me ask you this, if you were fighting your brother Fred - would you ignore George?"

"What, no! You would need to keep an eye on both."

"That's exactly what happened here Mr Weasley, and you got the points for also demonstrating what I keep reminding everyone they need to do. You have always to be aware of your environment, you can't assume other people will stand there and not interfere."

The professor glanced toward his godson. "Mr Potter, five points from Slytherin. I will not have students shouting out in my class."

This stunned the rest of the class until Dudley interrupted. "Excuse me Professor Black, is this the revenge you swore against us when we pulled that move on you?"

"Mr Dursley, if you think a measly five points counts as my revenge then you're sadly mistaken. I would also like to point out that it was five stinging hexes I was hit with, not one. I intend to seek retribution on your full motley crew. With people staying over the holidays, I'll even have an audience!"

This drew a wide smile from Dudley. "I think I just heard the gauntlet being thrown down guys. Only one thing left to say, bring it on...sir."

Ron couldn't help but state the obvious to the rest of the class. "You pulled that stunt on Professor Black?"

"Hey, it worked on dad too! Someone deliberately didn't tell him what we came up with, he at least managed to block a couple of the hexes. The only reason they haven't pranked us back yet is in the hope we can catch Remus out as well."

Sirius tried to be stern but there were six people there who recognised the laughter in his eyes. "Right class, we need the next pair to come forward. Any volunteers?"

It was a confused Ron Weasley who made his way back to his seat. In his mind, he'd just lost a duel because the other person cheated. How the hell did he end up earning his first house points and praise from a professor? Ron was finding his entire Hogwarts experience confusing and couldn't wait for the holidays so he could talk the situation over with his dad.

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The herbology class were just getting ready to leave the greenhouses and head for lunch when the group's mirrors sounded the alarm linked to Dumbledore, halting all of the class in their tracks. None of the six thought it was coincidence that they were furthest away from safety at the moment and, after spotting on the map

where the old wizard had positioned himself, were quickly convinced of this.

"He knows where we are, what time the period ends and that we need to pass him to get to the castle."

Harry had more to add to Hermione's observations. "Mum, dad and Sirius are going to have to cover a lot of open ground to get to him, they'll be sitting ducks!"

"So will we be if we stay here, he'll come for us and only Professor Sprout is here." Susan's remarks had a few of them glancing at the little round witch, she was at the other end of the greenhouse tidying up and didn't inspire any confidence.

"We can't let them come charging into an invisible Dumbledore, we need to create a diversion. Hermione, give me a book."

She handed one over and Dudley placed his mirror in it. Hermione had her wand already in her hand and held by her side, part of her though just had to sound a note of caution. "You do realise that this will get us grounded until we're at least seventeen?"

Dudley was unrepentant. "Better that than mum or dad getting hurt, we have surprise on our side so let's use it."

It quickly became apparent that none of their friends were prepared to wait behind either, and there wasn't time to argue.

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Albus knew the Gryffindors had herbology today, timing his arrival just inside the wards to coincide with the class ending. He was slightly concerned when he observed the group hesitating but dismissed this worry as they hadn't called out to their professor. The young minds were obviously having some sort of academic debate while they made their way to lunch. One of them now had a book out and was reading a passage aloud to his classmates.

The former headmaster had a chuckle to himself as he realised just how far the school and ministry were willing to go with their efforts to fool him, dressing both boys in Slytherin robes was taking the whole



deception too far in Albus' opinion. When the attack came, it was so sudden, so organised and so totally unexpected that he was caught completely by surprise.

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Dudley had the book open and his map held in the middle of it, the others needed their hands free for their wands. He was also having to talk rather loudly to offset the noise coming from all their mirrors as the adults desperately tried to contact them, obviously to tell them not to do what they were attempting. At the speed his dad and Sirius were heading in their direction, it was clear Prancer and Padfoot would be bounding to meet them within seconds. Their job was to buy their family those precious seconds by keeping Dumbledore's attention on them.

As they got closer to their target, Dudley was running out of things to say. "...and as you can see here, it clearly states the old whiskered wanker prefers to live in the shade. It shuns the light and needs loads of manure to flourish. In fact the perfect spot for this horrible member of the creeper family would be right over there!" With that, Dudley pointed directly at a disillusioned Dumbledore. This was the agreed upon signal, every first year there fired a curse where Dudley was pointing.

The torrent of curses caused Dumbledore to become visible, and required the shocked wizard to erect a shield for protection. The first years now scattered while still firing curses. They certainly didn't think these would actually bring Dumbledore down, just keep him so busy he wouldn't notice the real danger until it was right on top of him.

James' terror lent Prancer wings as the stag sped to his family's aid. As he galloped across the open ground, he immediately could see what the kids were trying to pull off here and was immensely proud of them. The parent just hoped they were all okay so he could rip strips off them later for being so bloody reckless.

The instant he thought he was close enough, Prancer became an enraged Lord Potter who wanted the old bastard's attention now solely on him. With a scream of 'Dumbledore' he cast the most powerful bludgeoning hex he could at the old bastard.

Albus barely managed to reinforce his shield in time to deal with this new level of threat when he noticed a big black dog become Sirius Black, also firing curses while moving across to try and prevent his escape. Albus was suddenly under attack from two powerful wizards and could clearly see the witch with a mane of red hair racing toward the fight to increase those odds.

With his mission blown completely, Dumbledore's only concern now was to extract himself from this situation. It had been many years since he'd fought with opponents of this ability, never mind power. There would certainly be more Hogwarts staff and ministry aurors already on their way to join the fight so Albus needed a passport to get out of here.

The kids had done what they set out to and were getting their arses away from the fight as quickly as possible when Luna was suddenly flying through the air. The little blond then found herself landing in Dumbledore's grasp with a wand pointing at her head. "Lower your wands and we can all walk away from here without anyone getting hurt."

James had instantly lowered his wand before seeing his son charge straight at the old bastard, shouting his name didn't slow Dudley down one iota.

Albus noticed this child running at him wasn't wearing robes, and hearing Potter call his name revealed the boy's identity. Knowing the lad was a muggle saw Albus just nonchalantly fire a low powered stunner at the boy. When a glowing rod appeared in the boy's hand and deflected his curse, Albus was astonished.

Seeing this old fart fire a curse at Dudley shocked Luna into action. Mentally thanking Aunt Amelia for the lessons, she put her training to good use. Her teeth sank into the arm holding her while her elbow fired sharply into this old fart's gut. Luna wouldn't be surprised if the heel of her sensible shoe managed to break a few bones in Dumbledore's instep with the force she used to stamp on it. This rapid triple physical assault had the old wizard crying out in pain, quickly releasing the little wildcat that had caused it.

When Harry screamed "Down Dud!" Luna knew exactly what was coming next. Having broken Dumbledore's hold, she flung herself flat on the grass.

The entire class had all been running toward the castle, actually managing to pass Dumbledore, when Luna had been snatched away. This was particularly bad news for the old wizard. Seeing Luna hit the deck too was all the encouragement an enraged Harry and Hermione needed.

At the age of four, Harry and Hermione had managed to inadvertently blast Sirius across the room when the marauder woke both toddlers by spraying cold water on them as they snuggled together in bed. That was the only time they had used their power together, and it had been an accident. The shock they got that morning had terrified both children and prevented them ever repeating that act, someone they loved had been really hurt by them. This fear remained as they grew older and more powerful but this man had just shown he was a very real threat to them and their family. He'd dared to snatch Luna and fire a curse at Dudley, Harry and Hermione both shot everything they had at Dumbledore.

An unprepared Dumbledore was hit with the force of a twister and flung arse over tit until the greenhouse the kids had just left arrested his flight. He smashed right into the old structure and shattered the three side supports he hit, collapsing almost half of the glass roof on top of him in the process. Thankfully, Professor Sprout had raced out to join the fight otherwise she could have been seriously injured.

Dudley crawled on his hands and knees until he covered the few yards needed to reach Luna, the shocked little blond clung to him for dear life. It was only seconds later they were hit by their friends arriving as everyone sought assurance they were all okay. The six were all on the grass, sharing tears and hugs when a stern voice drew them promptly back to the present. "You lot are in so much trouble, I don't even know where to start!" Lily promptly burst into tears and jumped into the middle of the group hug, needing the reassurance all her children were indeed fine.

James, Sirius and Pomona cautiously approached the badly damaged greenhouse, wands ready in case Dumbledore needed to be restrained. The groan emanating from the bloody heap was the only indication that the former headmaster was still alive. Minerva quickly arrived with Filius and found it hard to believe that the raggedy bundle lying here was once one of the most respected wizards in the world. Knowing that Amelia and Barty would be

already on their way with everything they had available, she cast a stasis charm on her former mentor. She didn't want him to bleed to death before getting a chance to provide some answers, Minerva hoped for something a little more substantial than the 'greater good' shit he used to be fond of quoting.

Leaving Filius and Sirius to guard Dumbledore, Minerva sent Pomona toward the gates so she could direct the ministry straight to the battle scene. The headmistress then turned her attention to the students still here, particularly the six still on the ground.

"How you four ended up in Slytherin is a mystery to me. I also can't make my mind up whether to give you special awards or detention until the end of seventh year. That was without doubt the bravest and stupidest thing it has ever been my displeasure to witness. The sight of Mr Dursley here attacking Albus Dumbledore with a toy is a memory that will stay with me until the grave."

"If there are any oblivators in the ministry squad, I just might let them take that memory away. Terrified the bloody life out of me!"

Dudley had his head down. "Sorry mum, but he had Luna..."

Lily lifted her son's head and kissed his cheek. "And I knew exactly what you would do as soon as I saw that, I think that's what terrified me the most. I've never been prouder of all of you, but expect to be grounded after I explain to the rest of the family exactly what happened here. Susan and Neville, prepare for incoming."

They all turned to see Frank, Alice and Amelia leading the charge of aurors in their direction. Susan and Neville jumped up and ran toward them.

James currently had his arms tightly around Harry and Dudley's shoulders. That both boys had a girl in their arms pleased him immensely. "I agree with the headmistress, bloody Gryffindors the lot of you. Just because we made you a lightsaber Dudley doesn't mean you have to go and take out Darth Vader with it!"

"Dad please, not the 'I'm your father Luke' line. I think I would throw up with just the thought of that."

Sirius sauntered over while filling a just arrived Remus in on exactly what happened. The honorary uncle couldn't help but show his feelings as the entire group was once more together. "It was bad enough watching the scene unfold on my mirror, hearing about it is even worse. What the hell were you lot thinking? Those mirrors and alarms were meant to keep you six out of trouble, not help you go looking for it."

Hermione was very quick to defend her boys. "We could see from where Dumbledore had positioned himself that our family would need to cross a lot of open ground before they could fire a curse. You taught us not to do that Uncle Remus, but at least three professors would have come charging down here anyway. We tried to keep Dumbledore watching us to give them a chance."

James leaned down to kiss his almost daughter on the cheek. "They saved our bacon Remus. I was going to charge Dumbledore as Prancer and hope to distract him enough so old Padfoot there could bite him on the arse."

"I bit him on the arm, and that was bad enough. I might never get the taste out of my mouth."

Sirius had picked up Dudley's lightsaber from where he'd dropped it in his haste to get to Luna. "You realise we could make another fortune selling lightsabers? Just think of the advertising possibilities, "the Toy that defeated Albus Dumbledore" I think they might even outsell the communication mirrors."

Hermione just couldn't resist a quip. "I suppose that's better than the boy-who-defeated-Dumbledore, now there's a Daily Prophet headline if ever I heard one."

On hearing that the aurors were now on site, Emma, Dan and Aurora had all raced to be with their family. Emma was currently reassuring a sniffling Luna that her mum and Dad were on their way to Hogwarts. The reality of the situation she had found herself in was beginning to hit their youngest member, she refused to move from Dudley's arms.

Amelia was the head of the DMLE though and needed to get her facts straight here. "So let me see if I've got this right. Slytherin and Gryffindor first years, with two guests, took down Dumbledore?"

Saying it aloud seemed to bring home the enormity of what they had just done, Amelia wasn't quite finished though. The head of the DMLE then provided the six kids with a piece of news none of them had thought of. "There is a rather substantial reward for the capture of Dumbledore. From what I've just heard, you kids have earned it."

"Oh it wasn't just us six, everyone helped."

"Hermione's right aunty, even Lavender Brown stood and fired a curse at him. She may have missed but she still stood there so certainly deserves a share of any reward. All our friends and classmates stood with us."

Sirius was wearing his best pretend pout. "Hey Prancer, what was the point of us racing out here if we weren't needed? It's my favourite lunch today too."

Lily soon sorted him out, indicating the witch who was currently wrapped in his arms. "And you left your wife and daughter sitting there without a word of explanation. Aurora's far too forgiving, she should at least get a nice dinner date out of you."

Minerva chose this moment to intercede as headmistress. "I think we should all head off to lunch. After all that excitement, I also think classes should be cancelled this afternoon. Perhaps arrangements could be made to put something on that wonderful screen, we could all do with a break."

Barty was personally supervising Dumbledore's transport to a secure facility in St Mungo's for treatment. He was quite happy to give Amelia time to see all her family had come through this unscathed.

It was with a heavy heart Barty watched the extended family all greet one another and focus on the children's welfare. As far as he was concerned, the old bastard lying here had a hand in robbing the minister of a similar future. His last act as minister of magic would be to ensure Dumbledore got what was coming to him.

Minerva had instantly provided Barty with a portkey to take Dumbledore through the Hogwarts wards before she had gone to

check on her students. It was time to get this over with, and discover how the old bastard got his hands on a first year Gryffindor timetable.

As the group was making its way back to the castle, James couldn't fail to notice that something was troubling Harry and Hermione. Fearing that he knew what was coming next, he asked his son what was bothering him. His answer shouldn't have been a surprise but it was.

"Dad was...was the old man okay?"

"Considering you both blasted him into a greenhouse, I think Dumbledore was as okay as he could be. Don't worry, the minister will make sure the old goat is fit enough to stand trial."

Seeing the relief on both faces was a reminder to them all of their ages. "We were going to try and stun him but when Luna managed to break free..."

Emma wrapped her daughter in a hug as Hermione started to cry. "I thought we'd killed him."

James now had his arm around Harry, Lily didn't appear ready to let Dudley go anytime soon. He tried to lighten the mood. "Here was me worried that we would all be heading home after lunch, I thought this attack would be the last straw. Does this mean you're not ready to leave Hogwarts?"

It was Harry who answered. "You saw our friends dad, they haven't had the same training as us but they all stood beside us. Even the Gryffindors who we don't know that well. I don't think we should leave our friends, and hopefully that's the last of the trouble."

Hermione was fighting against the tears as she offered a suggestion. "Perhaps we should get to know the Gryffindors better, could they stay over during the holidays too?"

After the morning they'd just had, the kids were going to be granted just about anything they asked for. Adding another four kids to the guest list would be no trouble at all, especially since James was already their head of house.

The group's reception as they entered the school was loud and enthusiastic. A bunch of firsties had just captured wizarding Britain's most wanted criminal, there were students up on the tables applauding like crazy. Minerva had been proven right, cancelling classes this afternoon was really their only option. Dan suggested a movie they might like to broadcast and Remus promised to take care of it.

-oOoOo-

Barty was heading back to Hogwarts with a much lighter heart. He had originally been worried that Dumbledore had accomplices inside the castle, that would have been a very bad situation. The healers had patched him up enough to get some veritaserum down his throat, quickly discovering his secret. Barty had to reluctantly tip his hat to the sleekit old bastard, he'd managed to fool everyone. It wasn't hard to imagine Dumbledore having a chuckle to himself as he sat down to eat the same dinner as everyone else in Hogwarts, using his elf had been a stroke of genius.

Those same healers though hadn't been too sure of Dumbledore's mental state, they were already convinced there was more than a touch of senility present. The degree of this senility would probably determine where Dumbledore spent the rest of his life. Barty was just glad to see it over. He entered the great hall to find everyone had their eyes riveted to the Danovision, clearly engrossed in what was being displayed there. Barty took his usual seat beside Minerva, only to discover she was the same.

She tried to bring him up to date on the classic adaptation of Dickens' 'A Christmas Carol' that was playing out on screen. Minerva couldn't help but draw parallels between the main character, Ebenezer Scrooge, and Dumbledore. Ebenezer may have worshiped gold to the detriment of everything else in his life, Albus had a different vice. He had a narrow vision of what the future should be, and proceeded to manipulate anyone and everyone to bring his vision to fruition.

Minerva though was forced to concede that no amount of ghostly visits would have deflected Albus from his chosen course, poor Tiny Tim would have been sacrificed on Albus Dumbledore's altar of the greater good. Her heart really hardened at the truth in those



thoughts, her former mentor and friend deserved everything that was surly coming his way.

A/N thanks for reading

Another chapter to deal with the aftermath of Dumbledore's capture, and a hint of what the future now holds for our hero's, should see the end of 'A Different Halloween'.

## Chapter 20

Barty couldn't help but gaze over the happy, smiling faces that filled the great hall, he really couldn't wait to be part of the Hogwarts family. The minister had in his possession items that should make some of those smiles even bigger. Minerva had contacted the parents of all those first year involved in today's incident, to ensure them their children were perfectly safe and invite them all along to dinner if they so wished. Thanks to all the quidditch visitors, Hogwarts was getting well used to dealing with guests. After first getting Minerva's permission, Barty made his way to the podium to address the entire hall.

"Good evening everyone, if I could please have your attention for just a few moments? I promise to keep this short and sweet. As the entire school now knows, Hogwarts had an unwelcome visitor earlier today. The former headmaster of this wonderful establishment made the mistake of thinking Hogwarts was still the same school from when he was in charge, a mistake that will see him locked up for the rest of his life."

This drew a loud cheer from everyone in the hall.

"I have been privileged to witness the changes that have slowly but surely returned Hogwarts once more to her rightful place, as the premier magical school in the world."

The cheering this time was louder and lasted longer.

"I can't think of any other magical school where a group of first years could take down the country's most wanted criminal, and it's those same group of first years I would like to honour tonight."

The cheering this time could have been heard in Hogsmead.

Minerva joined him at the podium and began calling her students out one at a time by house. When she got to both guests, the headmistress got another surprise. All the Slytherin prefects stood and asked to be heard.

"Headmistress, there can't be many people in the hall who would bet against Miss Lovegood joining her friends here in Slytherin after the sorting feast this September. Our house would like to offer an

honouree membership to Mr Dudley Dursley, before Gryffindor House get around to thinking of it."

This drew a mixture of cheers and laughter at the good-natured jibe against the house of the lions. That Slytherin had just invited a muggle to join their ranks might have been a shock to the adults in the hall, the students found it rather easy to accept.

Minerva knew she had to play this calmly and by the book, even though her insides were doing the dashing white sergeant from joy at her students' casual acceptance of this momentous situation. "I have absolutely no objections, but the final say must rest with the Head of Slytherin and Mr Dursley."

Sirius was on his feet within seconds. "Do I want the full set in Slytherin? Hell yes!"

All eyes now shifted to Dudley for his answer, it wasn't a hard decision for him to make. "I would be honoured and delighted to accept membership of the best house in Hogwarts. Sorry Dad!"

Slytherin house was now on its feet and applauding their newest member, while the other three houses were laughing at the different reactions coming from the staff table. Sirius was still on his feet, applauding with the rest of his house, while James was sitting with his arms crossed and a pout on his face.

While his public demeanour played to Dudley's joke, inside James Potter was probably more delighted than Minerva. He had even more reasons to be. Just over a decade ago, he had made a promise to raise his two sons in a way that one of them being a wizard wouldn't ruin their relationship as they got older. One glance was all that was needed to see the tears of happiness slowly escaping from his wife's wonderfully expressive emerald eyes. Their boys truly were brothers, brothers that wouldn't suffer the fate of their respective mothers.

Barty was delighted that once more he was able to witness history being made. Like Minerva though, the Minister of Magic was happy to underplay the event. Neither wanted to draw attention to just how big a deal this actually was. That the youth of their society could come this far merely a decade after their parents were fighting a civil war over blood issues was astonishing, it also made him more

determined than ever to work in the castle. He was really delighted though to be able to reward these children tonight, further enhancing the positive message Hogwarts was now pioneering and projecting to the rest of the country.

"When these brave young souls took a positive and pro-active response to today's intrusion, I'm sure that the prospect of rewards didn't even enter their minds. Nevertheless, there was rather a large price on Dumbledore's head."

This now had the entire hall hanging on Barty's every word. "The ministry were so delighted with the actions of these brave young people standing before us that they even increased that reward."

Barty knew he now had the entire hall eating out the palm of his hand, he let the silence drag on for a moment before revealing the good news. "The original reward was one hundred thousand galleons, but we didn't think that was enough. Each of the eighteen youngsters involved will receive a ministry bank draft for the sum of...Ten Thousand Galleons."

The cheering now rattled the rafters as the minister of magic shook each of the children's hand before handing them what was a small fortune.

They were soon joined by eighteen sets of very proud parents and guardians, Hermione made straight for her father. "Dad, I want to pay for the screen I destroyed."

"Hermione love, it was just a prototype that would eventually have been replaced. You don't have to..."

"Yes dad, I do. Let me pay for the new screen then? It would become Hogwarts property and stay here after the trial period ended."

PMP had always intended to gift a screen to the school for allowing them to test their system here but Dan could see this was something his daughter really wanted to do. Hermione had been ashamed of her behaviour that morning and this was her own personal way of atoning for it. "Okay, but you better believe there will be a large staff discount involved."

Lavender had been struck dumb with tonight's events but that could never last for long. Hearing Hermione talking to her father suddenly gave the bubbly Gryffindor an idea of what her first purchase should be from her new wealth. "Pav, this means we can buy those new communication mirrors. We'll be able to keep in touch during the holidays."

Dean on the other hand knew exactly what he would like to spend some of this money on. "I'm keeping mine for when the lightsabers go on sale, that was just awesome Dudley."

This was met with total agreement from the rest of the students and led to a request from Barty. "I've heard about these toys but never actually seen one, would you mind?"

Dudley unclipped it from his belt and activated the now iconic toy.

Dean's dad couldn't help himself, he was a bit of a Star Wars geek that was almost salivating at the thought of having his own lightsaber. "'Excuse me for asking, but I thought Dudley here was non magical like me. Does this mean I could buy a lightsaber?"

James decided to put this issue to bed once and for all. "Sorry Mr Thomas, and everyone else, but PMP will not be mass producing lightsabers."

The groans of disappointment that greeted this announcement forced James to explain his decision. "We built these for the kids as prototypes, basically just to see if it could be done. The beam that you see is a controlled variation of a shield spell, interwoven with a stinging hex. You'll see a small hole in the bottom, this is for a wand to cast a specific spell to recharge the storage crystal inside. All this is pretty simple." The stares this generated indicated that, while this might be 'simple' for PMP, they thought this was pretty impressive stuff.

"The real problem was complying with the statute of secrecy, we couldn't have these falling into unsuspecting non magical's hands."

Dudley knew what was expected of him and closed down the beam before handing it over to Dean's dad. The reverence that he accepted the lightsaber with was soon replaced by disappointment

as pressing the activate button produced no results. Dean was met by the same lack of results, as was the minister before James offered an explanation. "The device has an in-built system that will recognise the hand that wields it, this one is set to work for Dudley and no one else. This device protects our secrets but basically prevents mass production."

Barty didn't make it to be Minister of Magic by being stupid so had a question. "I can appreciate the need for something like that but don't you face the same problems with your mirror systems?"

Xeno was never one to miss a marketing opportunity. "Well, if you read this week's issue of the Quibbler, all will be explained. We have a full review of the items, including an entire article highlighting the unique security code for each set and a simple step-by-step guide on how to tie the mirrors to their users."

James was well used to their friend by now and just continued from where Xeno had left off. "The mirrors our kids have operate by voice recognition and a password to unlock the device. Charming mirrors to interact with their user have been available in our society for about as long as magical portraits. We didn't have to reinvent the wheel, just find new uses for it."

Dudley once more lit his lightsaber, just to show that it would still work with him. Dean's dad consoled himself with the fact that, at least he'd seen one working. "That really is a pity, you could have ended up a millionaire selling these."

This drew a deep chuckle from Barty. "Mr Thomas, Lord Potter and Lord Black are already millionaires, many times over."

This floored the London bus driver, his son was being taught by two millionaire Lords, and their wives.

That there would be no lightsabers had dented the mood, it was time to fix that. Susan had a quick glance toward Harry, his nod was all she needed. "Dean, would you, Lavender, Parvati, and Seamus like to spend some of the Christmas holidays with us at Potter Manor? All the first year Slytherins will be there too."

This silenced the entire group until Luna chipped in. "Oh please come, we'll have a great time. Our parents usually arrange things

like a trip to the local panto, a fairground visit and there's always a football match in there somewhere."

When the rest of the Slytherins offered encouragement too, their minds were made-up. Having all the parents there meant that arrangements were quickly made, and they even picked-up a Ravenclaw stowaway. James and Lily did everything in their power to keep Harry and Dudley close, they weren't about to separate a set of twins over the holidays.

As the group of first year Slytherins made their way back to their table, they discovered Ron Weasley in their path. It was déjà vu except for the hair colour as he zeroed in on Dudley, Ron's hand though was empty as he offered it for shaking.

"What you did today was brilliant, and I can now claim you practiced the move that brought down Dumbledore on me. Thanks."

It was a bemused Dudley who shook the happy Hufflepuff's hand. As they got back to their table though, he couldn't help commenting on what just happened. "Okay, was it just me or did anyone else think that was weird?"

Susan, as usual, was first with her answer. "Oh I'm with you Dud, definitely weird. Then again, he's a pureblood - they're all weird!"

That Susan Bones was from one of the most respected pureblood families in Britain helped her housemates see the joke. That Neville, whose pedigree was every bit as impeachable as Susan's, provided a tagline got the rest of them laughing. "Well, all the ones that we know are anyway."

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It was a Minister of Magic in a reflective mood that shared his usual small dram with Minerva in her office later that night.

"I thought you'd be happier Barty, are you reconsidering your decision to leave the ministry?"

"Oh Merlin no, I hope to be out of there for the New Year. Catching Dumbledore just reopened a few old wounds I thought had healed

long ago Minerva. I personally hold Dumbledore almost as responsible for my son's untimely death as Voldemort."

Minerva had no intention of defending Dumbledore, just easing Barty's pain. "I taught Barty junior too, and I never noticed anything untoward. I can't help feeling we failed an entire generation..."

"No Minerva, there is certainly enough blame for my son's death to go around but I can't see any of it stopping at your door. I carry my own mountain of guilt over this, a father who was so wrapped up in his career that he couldn't see what was happening in his own house. No, my grudge against Dumbledore is a lot more specific and goes much deeper than him being Headmaster of Hogwarts at the time."

Now that he'd said this much, Barty had to take it further. "Dumbledore knew that my son had joined the death eaters, he got the information from Snape. Did he have a quiet word with me about this? No, he kept quiet about it and then used this information to try and blackmail me into releasing Snape before his boy could be questioned. Dumbledore came to me with his 'proposal' on the same day my son took his own life."

Minerva's gasp of horror was the only sound to be heard, Barty's gaze was locked onto the glass of amber liquid in his hand.

"You have no idea how many nights I've spent torturing myself, wondering whether I could have saved Barty if Dumbledore had come to me earlier? He had all this vital information but reckoned no one other than Albus bloody Dumbledore should know about it, I can't help wondering how many lives were ruined by his inactions."

Barty needed a sip of his single malt before he could continue. "I also couldn't help wondering what fate would have befallen those children who I rewarded earlier if Dumbledore's plans hadn't been thwarted. Harry Potter and Neville Longbottom would certainly have fared differently, and I just couldn't see Dudley Dursley being invited to join Slytherin if Dumbledore had still been headmaster."

The Minister of Magic felt the comforting touch of the Headmistress as Minerva gently ran her hand along his arm. "Thankfully Barty, that is something we will never know. I only hope that Dumbledore now pays for his actions."



"The healers were all certain it was his long period of self-imposed isolation that's responsible for his now diminished mental awareness. Since all of his crimes were committed before this period, I intend to push for Azkaban to be his new home for the remainder of his life. That he was caught on Hogwarts grounds should certainly help my case, most of the Wizengamot have family currently enrolled here. He's going down Minerva, and he's going down for good."

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Harry was currently going down to their common room. Lying in bed while unable to sleep was not a recommended way to spend the night. His whole demeanour changed when he spotted Hermione already sitting on their favourite sofa, both clearly felt better the instant he joined her.

"I guess you couldn't sleep either?"

"Oh Harry, every time I closed my eyes, I kept seeing that old man crash into the greenhouse. It doesn't matter how many times I tell myself that he was a criminal who wanted to harm you, my mind just sees a decrepit old man that we nearly killed."

"I know Hermione, my mind is playing the exact same tricks on me. That's what brought me down here, though I would have come much sooner had I known you were waiting on me."

Both were now wrapped comfortingly in each other's arms, the calming effect was almost instantaneous. This saw Harry bemoaning their current situation. "I can't wait to get home, sleeping this far from you is pure torture. The thought of spending another six and a half years like this is making me reconsider staying in Hogwarts."

"There is a way we could shorten that time, apart from asking our head of house to get a bigger sofa in here."

Harry was now really interested in what Hermione was going to say next, she didn't disappoint. "There is a suite of rooms set aside for the head girl and boy. Providing we both got those positions, that would take a year off our time."

Harry thought this was a great idea but could see a downside. "If I spent a year living with you, I could never go back to being apart again."

Hermione of course had an answer for that too. "Well then, we'll just have to get married when we leave Hogwarts."

Harry kissed his betrothed to show his enthusiastic support for that idea. "I had to promise your dad we would wait until we left school, the following day works for me."

With their minds now focused on pleasanter things, both were soon sleeping soundly.

They hadn't been asleep long when Dudley came down with a blanket from Harry's bed, spreading it over the couple as they snuggled in together. He found himself joined by Luna and Susan, armed with another blanket that they'd removed from Hermione's now unoccupied four poster.

Susan draped this one over them too while speaking barely above a whisper. "These two were always going to end up down here tonight. Well I'm going back to bed, I intend to continue dreaming about what I'm going to spend all that money on."

She whispered goodnight to Dudley and Luna before heading back up to the dorm. Luna slipped her hand into Dudley's. "I never got the chance to say thanks for today, you came running to my rescue again."

"You don't have to say thanks Luna, it's me who should be saying sorry. It was my harebrained scheme that got you captured in the first place. If anything had happened to you..."

Dudley couldn't find any more words to continue, so Luna squeezed his hand in understanding and kissed his cheek in thanks. Even with just the light coming from the dying embers of the fire, she could see Dudley blush as her lips brushed his cheek. "If it wasn't for your idea, people would have been hurt today. It also had an unexpected bonus too, I'll be able to pay for my end of the flat we'll all share while going to university."

"You know you don't have to do that?"

"I know but I had always intended to, this way I won't have to ask mum and dad for it. I agree with Hermione in that we should try to stand on our own two feet. Well, in their case, stand as a couple."

"That's something I agree with too." Calling on all his courage, Dudley bent down and kissed Luna on the cheek. The double meaning in Dudley's words, combined with the kiss, had Luna practically walking on air as she headed in the direction of the first year girl's dorm. Both went to their bed's very happy, though neither of them thought they would be falling asleep anytime soon.

-oOoOo-

While the Prophet had totally buried Dudley's involvement with the demise of Voldemort, Xeno had no such compunctions concerning Dumbledore's downfall. That this time the lad's actions had many witnesses also ended any chance that it would remain secret. Dumbledore once more attempting to break into Hogwarts could have spelt trouble for the headmistress, him being taken down by a muggle with a toy killed those worries stone dead.

The Quibbler was pushing the story from the angle that Dudley's actions allowed others to then take care of magical Britain's most wanted criminal, there was no mention that those 'others' were Harry and Hermione. Again, there were many witnesses to this act but the minister spreading the reward amongst all of the first year involved diverted unwanted attention away from just how powerful the young betrothed couple actually were. The first years were featured as the undoubted heroes of the piece, containing Dumbledore until the staff got there.

Under veritaserum, he had revealed the location of his Glengarry bolt hole. There the aurors soon discovered his memoirs, and they made very interesting reading. Here was every wrongdoing by one of the most magically and politically powerful figures of the last century, all written by his own hand. That his book also contained page after page where he attempted to justify each and every one of these despicable actions ensured that the name Dumbledore would forever be associated with its own brand of infamy.

His claim that Barty murdered his own son was met with derision, especially since Dumbledore freely admitted attempting to blackmail

the man on the day his son committed suicide. That this was the same day Dumbledore attempted to murder Severus Snape, while Snape was recovering in a ministry cell, focused the investigation elsewhere. Here was a man who cast an unforgivable curse on an auror to escape capture that night.

Barty Crouch being universally regarded as the best Minister of Magic in living memory saw no investigation heading in his direction. Barty had made no secret of the fact that he badly wanted Dumbledore caught, and these attempted blackmail revelations was explanation enough for the people who mattered. They well remembered just how crazy the ministry had been for the few days after Voldemort's downfall, and that Barty had been in the ministry when his son died. There could be no doubt that most of the credit for destroying the death eaters hung squarely on the shoulders of the man who'd just announced he was resigning as minister. The phrase 'job done' was enough of an epitaph on his time as Minister of Magic.

After Dumbledore was sentenced to life in Azkaban, Barty's last act as minister was to authorise the publishing of Dumbledore's book. Dumbledore was now about to find one of his greatest wishes coming true. He would be delighted to know this very personal labour of love was an instant best-seller, all the profits going to St Mungo's would seriously piss him off though. With his last act as minister, Barty was ensuring that no one person would ever wield that much power again. His advice to the minister elect was to make every prospective ministry employee read the book, and any that didn't throw up should be rejected out of hand. Amelia promised to at least consider it.

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It was a couple of happy parents who watched their brood head for Hogsmead to catch the express to London. Dan and Emma, with of course Dudley and Luna, would be waiting on them there. The family would all be back home in Crawley tonight and then set off for Potter Manor tomorrow. They would spend Christmas together before their children's Slytherin and Gryffindor friends arrived to spend a few days with them.

The addition of Padma Patil had an unexpected but very welcome effect. Her inclusion led to the other first year Ravenclaws getting to

know the group better. Never ones to be left behind in the friendship stakes, the Hufflepuffs took this as their cue to join in as well. Neither Potter could ever remember a year where the new student intake had integrated so well, even the youngest Weasley boy had stopped making such an arse of himself.

The Weasley twins had rushed up to shake James by the hand before heading for the train, their elder brother just marched past with his nose in the air.

Lily was trying not to giggle at the boy's antics as she asked her husband what he'd done to warrant such a snubbing. Percy's glare was like being mauled by a dead flobberworm.

"Oh I put prefect Percy on probation until the end of the year. If I don't see an improvement in his attitude by then, there will be no shiny badge on his robes come September. I want a prefect who can think for themselves and will actually help the younger students, not just quote the Hogwarts rulebook at them. Needless to say, I'm no longer on Percy's Christmas card list."

Lily couldn't hold the attack of the giggles anymore. James just loved the sound she made, which was why he tried to get her giggling as often as possible. His wife though soon wiped the satisfied smirk off his face.

"Speaking of Christmas, I thought we could all go shopping for our gifts tomorrow. That would give us the rest of the holidays to relax - and before you pull a PMP board meeting out of thin air, I should warn you that Aurora is telling Sirius the same."

With that last comment, James knew his fate was sealed. The only thing he could think of that Sirius enjoyed more than shopping for toys would be shopping for toys for his beloved Joy. That, and working on adding a little brother or sister to their family, but they tended to disapprove of couples doing that in Harrods.

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Thursday 4th June 1998

Dudley sat there and watched his proud parents as they waited for the ceremony to start, Uncle Dan and Aunt Emma also appeared as

pleased as punch. Dudley understood he should be feeling a sense of pride too, but the ring currently burning a hole in his pocket demanded all his attention. Dudley Dursley was bricking it big time.

Harry's hand on his shoulder offered some comfort, but not a lot. His words made sense to the young man but nothing was going to help until the deed was done. "Dudley, do you honestly think there's the slightest chance she's going to say no?"

"Oh, that's cute Harry. Especially since I remember a certain someone shitting themselves in case he messed up, and you guys were already betrothed with the date of your wedding already picked."

Harry was chuckling as he thought back to the incident Dudley just reminded him of. "Yes, I wanted to make it perfect for Hermione. I forgot the most important thing though, just by me asking meant it was already perfect for Hermione. Luna's going to flip when she sees that ring, that it comes from you is all that will matter to her. Just don't let one rip when you ask her, that's a definite no-no."

"Thanks for those wonderful words of wisdom oh mighty head boy, just remember your own advice when you've to stand up there and give your speech."

"Hey, could be worse, I could have a best man speech to give on Saturday."

This got a groan out of Dudley, he was left wishing the Slytherin robes he was currently wearing had a hood so he could pull it over his head and hide. "Is this pick on Dudley day?"

Sensing his distress brought a beautiful blonde witch to his aid. Hearing his last comment saw Luna pull no punches. "Nobody better be picking on my boyfriend, you nervous love?"

Dudley's nod of affirmation saw Luna offering her own brand of logic. "The first non magical student to graduate from Hogwarts shouldn't be feeling nervous, sitting four N.E.W.T.'s is a fantastic achievement."

"It's nothing to do with that. I made a promise to your dad that I'm about to break, only by a matter of minutes though but I can't wait

any longer." Dudley dropped to one knee on the raised platform containing all the graduating students, a box with a diamond ring was now in his hand. "Luna, would you do me the honour of being my wife?"

Dudley didn't hear his mother's joyous shriek, nor did he see Harry and Hermione bouncing up and down with excitement. His entire attention was focused on the woman he'd loved for years. Time appeared to stand still as he watched her eyes fill with tears, it was the wide smile that suddenly graced her lips that allowed his heart to continue beating.

"I've wanted you to ask me that question since I was about nine, of course I'll marry you!"

Dudley slipped the ring on her finger before rising to kiss his fiancée, this was the signal for the rest of the world to intrude. It was like taking the mute button off as suddenly the noise was incredible and they were surrounded by their friends.

The Hogwarts graduating ceremony was rapidly spiraling toward pandemonium before the headmistress stepped in to regain control. "Mr Dursley, kindly unhand Miss Lovegood and stop interrupting this ceremony. You are all still my students until we finish here today. I knew you lot were trouble the moment I laid eyes on you. My first clue was a Bones being sorted into Slytherin, and things just went downhill from there." Minerva's wide smile was not the rarity it used to be, telling the graduating students - and the large audience that she was joking.

"Year after year I stand here and say goodbye to our graduating students, but I can say in all honesty that this group here have been an exceptional bunch. I don't even have to wonder when I will see them again as we are all attending a certain wedding this Saturday. It therefore gives me great pleasure to call on our head girl to perform her last official duties as Miss Granger, and our head boy who of course is also her soon to be husband Mr Potter."

The applause was thunderous as Hermione and Harry came forward to speak, Emma was engrossed in their leaving speech until she noticed her best friend in tears. "Are those happy tears Lily?"

"Oh Emma, I just watched one of my son's get engaged to a wonderful girl and our other gets married on Saturday. I really couldn't be happier but my mind drifted back to our first meeting, all those years ago. I guess it began when I was wishing Petunia could have witnessed her son becoming engaged, or even just seen what a fine young man Dudley has grown into. I started wondering what would have happened if Hermione didn't come over that day in the clinic, we would have spent a very different Halloween if you hadn't invited us back for tea. No matter how many times I say it, I can still never thank you enough for that day."

"Lily, we've been family for years, and this weekend makes it official. Let's have no more talk of needing to thank me, looking up on that stage is all the thanks I'll ever need. All our children have grown up healthy and incredibly happy, what else could a mother possibly want?"

Dan, James and Sirius were sitting behind the ladies, pretending not to be listening to every word. Little James Black was sitting on his father's knee, getting a break from his two adoring elder sisters and revelling in the male company. They had heard the speeches before, Harry and Hermione had practiced them on the family last night. Both were certainly more nervous about this than their wedding at the weekend, that reminded Sirius of a question he wanted to ask.

"So, have we found out any more about this mystery girl Moony's taking as his date to the wedding?"

James shook his head. "All I know is that she's young, beautiful and Lily has promised to hex my bits off if I as much as say anything out of line."

Dan pretty much agreed with James. "Emma may not be able to hex me but her warning was every bit as eye wateringly painful, and you just know the kids love their Uncle Remus."

"Yeah, Joy and Hope threatened not to speak to me. We'll just have to get creative and prank him on the Sunday. I can't believe we all ended up henpecked!"

As the speeches ended, they stood to applaud the outgoing head boy and girl. Their behaviour was pretty outgoing as well as they kissed on stage.



"I don't mind the henpecked bit so much, it's the thought that Lily and I could be grandparents before we hit forty that gives me sleepless nights."

Dan knew they were all looking forward to becoming grandparents, just not for a few years yet. "Those four will all want to finish university before starting a family, my money would be on Frank and Alice having that honour first. I think Pansy is quite taken with the idea of being a housewife for her auror husband, there will be a ring there shortly."

"I always thought he and Susan would get together but it just never came to pass. Watching Susan actually terrifies the life out of me. She's beautiful, wealthy, niece to the minister and, apart from our three, has every boy above fourth year drooling over her. I don't know how Amelia copes, I'm thinking of locking my two girls away until they're at least twenty eight!"

James just couldn't help teasing his friend. "Yes, Merlin forbid they meet the equivalent of a young Sirius Black."

The look of dread on his face had Dan and James quietly laughing at his discomfort. "When I first heard my little girl was forming a bond with a boy, I didn't know what to make of it. Now, I think it's the best thing that ever happened to our family and I'm looking forward to walking her down the aisle. Our Dudley just picked himself one hell of a girl too."

The rest of the family began making their way over and there were congratulatory hugs all round.

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Harry stood with his arm around his bride to be, they were taking a last glance at the apartments that had been their home for the last year. "I thought I would miss this place more but I'm ready to go home."

Hermione rested her head on his now broad shoulders. "I've been very happy here, that was easily the best year we spent at Hogwarts."

"Oh I agree, but then I would be happy anywhere as long as I was with you."

"Smooth Potter, very smooth but I know what you mean. Never having to sleep apart from you again is something I'm really looking forward to."

"We've just spent the best part of a year living together love, and I have no intention of being separated ever again. Even if I have to borrow my dad's cloak, I'll be with you every night up to, and including Saturday."

Dudley and Luna entered to find the both of them currently engaged in a deep kiss. "Told you love, Hermione would have all their packing done last night. If you two don't get a move on, we're gonna miss the train."

With one final look around, they left Slytherin and Hogwarts - Oxford University and the rest of their lives beckoned.

The End

A/N Thanks for Reading.